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HENRIETTE

FROM THE FRENCH

.. OF ..

LEON DE TINSEAU

BY

ANNA D. PAGE,

TRANSFER N.Y.



JOHN W. LOVELL

NEW YORK

COMPANY:

150 WORTH ST.
COR. MISSION PLACE:

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FROM THE FRENCH

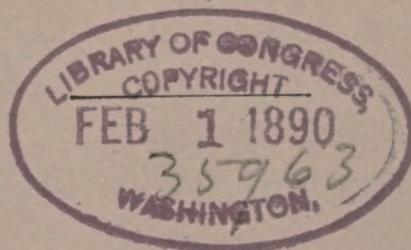
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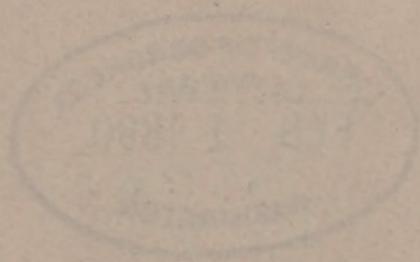
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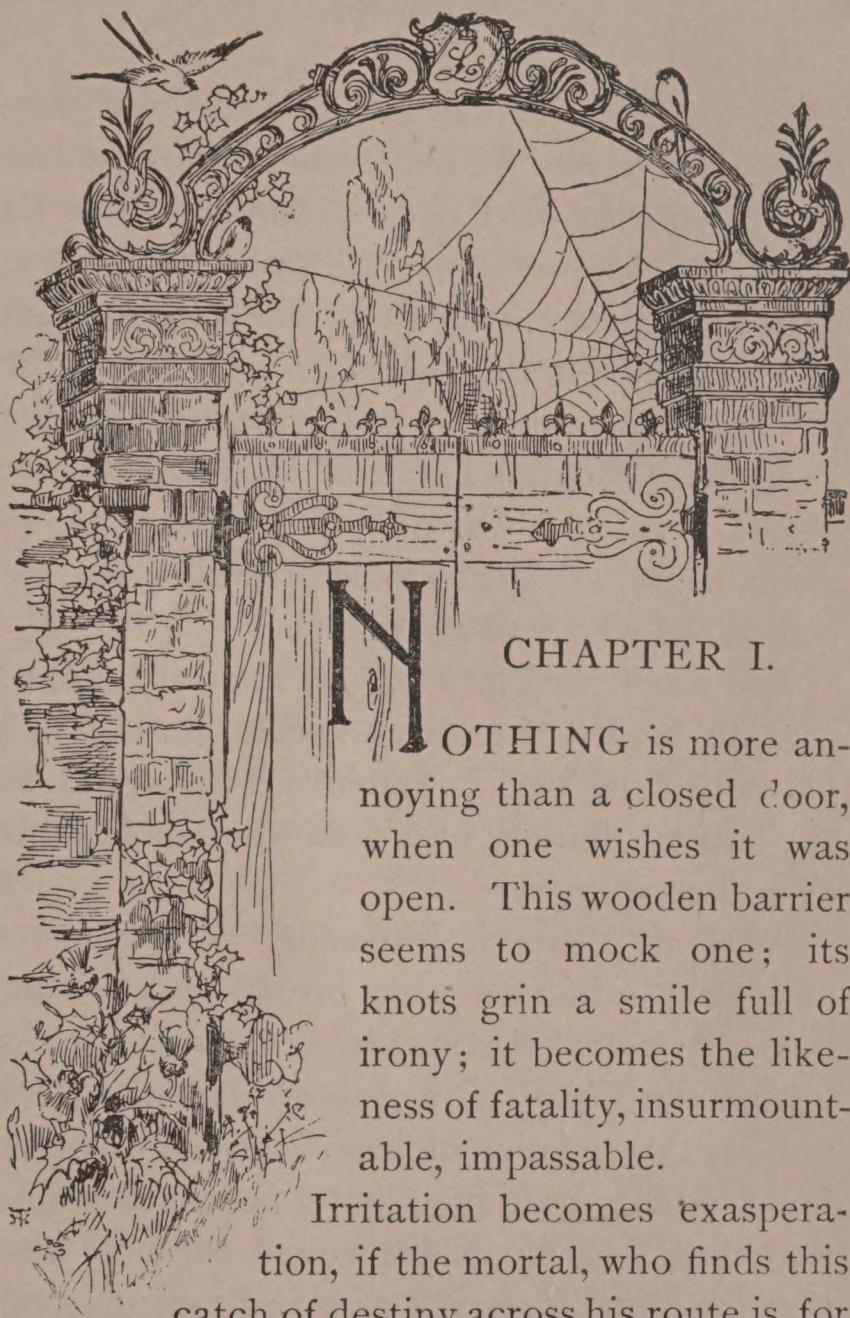
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CHAPTER I.

NOTHING is more annoying than a closed door, when one wishes it was open. This wooden barrier seems to mock one; its knots grin a smile full of irony; it becomes the likeness of fatality, insurmountable, impassable.

Irritation becomes exasperation, if the mortal, who finds this catch of destiny across his route is, for some especial reason, in bad humor or hurried.

On a certain day toward the end of May,

1877, M. Lasserre was in both of these conditions. He was in bad humor because two days before he had been dismissed from his office of sous-préfet of Montescourt; he was hurried because, flying from the hateful sight of a triumphant successor, he must leave the city that same day. Lastly, the gate of the Post and Telegraph Office of Montescourt was closed because it was noon. At this hour, in a small city, all is silent; all rest and eat, except those who wait upon others.

For nearly five minutes M. Lasserre tapped with his bent fore-finger, a succession of quick blows, jerking with impatience, but curbed by the natural timidity of a man who has become of no importance.

After all a gate is imposing. We know of audacious criminals who break open strong boxes, profane tabernacles, wrench from their hinges the doors of a queen's chamber, but nobody that I know of, has ever seen a person break open a post-office gate, because, behind that dark board, sits enthroned the only king that the French respect now and that they will never be able to behead or proscribe, to wit: The Government.

Persistence conquers everything. Soon steps are heard in the interior of the office, the gate slides and a second face equally as sullen appears at the opening, facing the other. The light perfume of onion floats through the air, at the same time a harsh voice inquires, "What's wanting?"

"A despatch for Paris—thirteen words—here are sixty-five centimes."

"Oh! it is you, Monsieur le sous-préfet!" exclaimed the Post Master, for it was himself in person. "How is your health?"

"I am no longer sous-préfet, and you know it. The proof is, that your velvet cap still shelters your cranium and that you do not invite me into the office as usual.. But it is all right. Meanwhile I am in a hurry and you were at the table."

"Oh! Monsieur le—— a thousand pardons, Monsieur Lasserre, how could you think it?—Do you intend to leave us?"

"Do you advise me, I should like to know, to wait until my successor turns me into the street? I am discharged, I must go away; I leave to-night. Will you forward my letters to this address in Paris?"

"Oh! monsieur," exclaimed Father Godelin, moved at the sight of his misfortune; "these political changes are very much to be regretted!"

"You will see many other changes, I assure you; I hope nothing unpleasant will happen to you. Au revoir, and who knows? We may meet again sooner than we think."

"Believe me it will be with pleasure, monsieur. Meanwhile a pleasant journey and good health to you and your family."

Father Godelin was preparing to close the gate and rejoin his family, who were waiting at the table for him. Misfortunes never come singly.

"Pardon!" said a stranger who had been in the office several moments. "Will you have the goodness to look and see if you have any letters for me? Here is my card."

O horrors! upon the card he read: Le Count de Reygnac.

There was not a single Montescurian, great or small, who had not known, for several days, the name of M. Lasserre's successor, and the successor was no other than the Count de Reygnac, and he had heard the conversation

that had taken place! He had seen one of Montescourt's public officials talking on good terms with the discharged magistrate, removing his velvet cap and offering him his left hand—the right had been left at Crimea and the arm also.

When Lasserre went out, throwing his "Au revoir" like a menace, Godelin had replied "with pleasure," which was no more nor less than blaming the new elections of the 16th of May, and wishing its political defeat. The good man's fingers trembled, a cold perspiration gently oozed from his honest brow, and he was unable to find the box marked "R" in the letters "left till called for."

At last he succeeded in finding it and gave the count a voluminous collection of papers and letters. As Gaston de Reygnac turned to leave, far from suspecting the agony he had caused by his presence, there came from behind him, across the wire work, a supplicating voice calling: "Monsieur le sous-préfet!"

The person to whom, for the first time in his life, this title was given, turned mechanically to see who spoke to him. He was alone in the office.

"M. le sous-préfet!" repeated Godelin nearly ready to faint. "Ah! it is true," said Reygnac smiling, "it is I, I am not yet accustomed to it. What can I do for you, monsieur?"

"I wish to explain my actions to you. There are some situations very embarrassing for an honest father of a family, but, monsieur, I am not hostile to the government."

"I do not quite understand what you wish to say to me," replied Reygnac. "Come to my office and see me one of these days; we will talk together."

Five minutes later he was in his room at the "Croix Blanche," where he had located himself, and the slight baggage that he brought with him, the rest to come later. Gaston looked over his mail; it consisted of about twenty letters, a large number of papers, and several bills. The letters came from his relatives and friends, from two or three beautiful women, to whom he had once been devoted, and from some creditors who congratulated him on the "lucrative position" he had obtained which was the same as to say, that they too hoped to reap the benefit of it. "Bah! Let them

talk!" says Reygnac, shrugging his shoulders, "Fools!"

Among all these letters of different import, there was but one which he read entirely through, it was signed "Raoul de Barjols" and dated at the "Sporting Club." It commenced thus:

"Ah! Ah! my jolly fellow! You never informed us that you wished to save France. I do not blame you, in the least, for she needs it. But I know you too well, not to believe that the prospect of being useful at the same time to the elected, Gaston de Reygnac, is not absolutely indifferent to you; you are, of course, perfectly right. Between us, you were too unlucky with the queen of spades, and too generous with the queen of hearts. Here you are until the 14th of October anyway, if the curtain drops on your next election (I advise you not to count upon it too much) you will lose very little by it.

"As for myself, I am rejoiced to have you at Montescourt, my old companion. It is a lucky thing for us! As soon as the Grand Prix is run, you will see me appear in your office. I will make inquiries about your surroundings,

its electors, its candidates, as well as its heiresses; the latter is a subject which I should advise you to study seriously, for governments change but dowries remain—sometimes."

The advertisements came from manufacturers of uniforms, wine merchants from Bordeaux and Champagne, and from traders of all kinds.

As to the newspapers, they came from all parts of the county and its confines, generally mentioning Reygnac's election, without any comments. But one of them commenced its leading article thus: "Until the 16th of May raises the king to the throne, it gives us a sous-préfet who descended from the crusade. Behold, an official of the moral order designed in advance, but who will be some day unceremoniously dismissed!"

For three columns this clever writer continued in this amiable tone, accusing the Count de Reygnac, in plain words, of being a roué, a constant frequenter of clubs, a knight of the gaming table. They forgot to say, of course, that the red ribbon which decorated the breast of this dandy, concealed a hole made by a Prussian ball in 1870.

"The devil!" thought Gaston, reading the signature at the end of this vigorous lashing, "Citizen Magalas loses no time, and to think that I am not allowed the satisfaction of pulling this scoundrel's ears! Truly, it is a great thing to be an official personage!"

These philosophical reflections were interrupted by the entrance of a little old man wearing spectacles, who introduced himself as Érasme Lefèvre, senior clerk of the sous-préfecture of Montescourt.

"Monsieur le sous-préfet," said he, "I have just learned of your arrival by an employé at the post office. I hastened to pay my respects and to place myself at your command."

"Please be seated, Monsieur Lefèvre. How long have you filled this office?"

"Nearly thirty years; that is to say, since the time I returned from Algiers with the Sergeant Major's stripe."

"A good career, monsieur."

"Long at least, but I sigh for my pension. The government, as we understand it, is no longer possible. To-day the sous-préfets no longer govern a district; they pierce through it like a bullet"—

"Or they burst like a bomb, for example, M. Lasserre."

"Yes, but others become préfets after three years' time. That I wish you, monsieur."

"Thanks. Meanwhile, when can I take possession of my new quarters?"

"At once; the place is free, your predecessor left this morning."

"Then I will go and settle myself there at once."

As Gaston was walking to his residence, escorted by a boy from the hotel carrying his bag, they passed the person whom he had seen at the post office.

It was the unfortunate Lasserre. Leaning upon his arm was a lady of modest appearance and dress, with eyes red from weeping, leading by the hand a small child.

"The late sous-préfet," whispered Gaston's companion, much amused at the meeting.

Gaston, entirely new in politics, felt ill at ease in the presence of the couple whose ruin he had indirectly caused.

He bowed as one bows to a wounded adversary in the field, but the husband and wife, apparently little touched by this considerate-

ness, passed proudly by, without returning the salute of the conqueror.

“Well!” thought the new comer, “the day has commenced well. Lasserre and Magalas, two enemies already. Who knows how long a time it will take for me to make one friend?”

CHAPTER II.

THE building occupied by the sous-préfet of Montescourt is a large, square, uninviting house, situated at the rear of a well-turfed yard. An ordinary gate, very rarely painted, separates this prison from an irregular street, honored by the name of place.

One enters this building by three doors of unequal size, opening into the middle and at each end of the edifice. The first is surmounted by a flag, often seditious, thanks to the wind and rain, and is used by the sous-préfet, his family, if he has one, and visitors when they come. The door on the left, with an explanatory inscription overhead, gives access to the office and private room of the head of the department. The third door leads to the kitchen and is used by the servants and tradespeople.

Gaston de Reygnac asked at once to be shown to his own rooms. They ushered him

into a large room on the first floor, hung with rose-colored paper and draped with cretonne once the same shade. The furniture was like that of a second-class country hotel. In the dressing room, which was nearly as large as the chamber, one saw little else but a basin painted in blue design, containing yet, like a legacy of hate, the residue of the last ablution of the Lasserres. Other relics no less inviting were on the floor, a toothless comb, boots worn out, a broken corset steel, a paper collar indiscreetly telling of the administrative perspirations of M. Lasserre. Another article badly worn lay upon the floor, which was stained in spots by soap suds.

This offensive spectacle was still more forcibly seen in an adjoining apartment, which had evidently been used for a sleeping room and play room for the young family. Broken toys, fragments of picture books, and brimless hats, littered the floor. In the centre of the room was an aquarium, which had probably been brought from the drawing room to be used as a plaything for the children, it contained the dead body of a gold fish, whose tarnished side was half out of the forbidding-looking water.

Without doubt a young artist in embryo had washed his paint brushes there. But the general desolation shone forth nowhere more than in the kicthen, where the odor of stagnant greasy water floated yet, whilst the saucepans, stained with the menacing color of verdigris, breathed out terrible predictions. A broken salad bowl strengthened by a string, was covered with the remains of the dressing which cheered the last repast of the Lasserres.

From cellar to garret, with the exception of the drawing room, usually unoccupied, the house was in this state. It would need, at least, the work of three persons one week to render it habitable, and yet Reygnac wished to dine and sleep there that same evening; for this well-to-do Parisian anything was better than a small country hotel.

Upon hearing his decision Lefèvre threw his arms up and turned his dismayed face toward the wall. But soon this administrative person resumed his stolid expression.

“It is impossible,” said he, “unless monsieur travels with all his household effects.”

“Why?” asked Reygnac, “is not the house furnished?”

"To a certain extent, but the furniture does not include sheets, linen, crockery, silver or glass."

"Like the legend of the toothpicks, one carries them in his beard," thought Reygnac smiling. "Such confidence does us honor. Only my dear mother's calculations will be upset, for I shall need at the very least 1,000 crowns for the first outlay." The new sous-préfet of Montescourt was not disappointed. Thanks to Prosper, his valet, thanks still more to the landlord of the "Croix Blanche," upon whom large requisitions were made, the conqueror dined and slept in the enemy's camp. However this preference given to a rival establishment makes one enemy the more, in the person of the landlord of the "Commerce," who, hesitating until then, swears no more from that time only by the opposition.

As he was gloomily eating his solitary meal, Gaston received a despatch on yellow paper. In place of words, he saw a series of four ciphers. It was necessary to send for the indispensable Lefèvre. With the aid of a little book which resembled a dictionary, Lefèvre with an important air translated the mysteri-

ous telegram. It was couched in these terms:

“Come to the préfecture to-morrow and bring me a report upon the candidates in your department, also upon the electoral situation.”

“At what hour does the first train leave for X——?” asked Reygnac, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

“At eight o’clock, monsieur. Do you wish me any longer?”

“No, thanks, you may leave. I shall comply with the préfet’s summons, but I intend to return to-morrow evening. After to-morrow, we will work.”

“Well!” said the young man when alone, “my chief takes things coolly. Yesterday at this hour, I dined at the club, afterward I have supper and then take a night train, and here I am. Now, he asks me to report on the electoral situation. Zounds! three days ago I should have been at a loss to have told even its geographical situation.” All at once Gaston spied a set of drawers labelled with these solemn titles: “General Politics, Police Reports, Personal, Morals, Correspondence with the Préfecture, etc.”

"Ah, to be sure," thought he, "I may possibly find something inside." He opens the drawer of "Police Reports." The first document, dated back several days, remarked the "unpleasant impression" produced by the rumor of change in the department, and the "devotion of the population" to the present form of government, a little more and it would have gone as far as to predict barricading, and all the horrors of civil war, in the streets of Montescourt. It was signed "Bongrand, Superintendent of Police." Just as Reygnac finished reading these sombre predictions M. Bongrand in person was ushered in. He was a man tall, and thin, with grizzly hair and an upright soldierly bearing; one recognized in him that devotion, at once ridiculous and sublime, which consisted of not using his own intelligence in the service. It was to be seen, nevertheless, that in the present case, the sacrifice was neither meritorious nor difficult. Bongrand made the required salute and remained standing, no persuasion could induce him to be seated.

"Monsieur le sous-préfet," said he, "I come to pay my respects and to take your orders."

"I am very much obliged to you. What I wish to know first is your opinion upon the electoral situation of Montescourt."

The honest man raised his eyes to the ceiling as if one had asked him an impossible question.

"The change of office," said he, "has produced a favorable impression upon the people."

"Indeed!" said Reygnac. "Are you the person who wrote this, Monsieur Bongrand?"

Without the slightest embarrassment the old sub-officer verified his signature at the close of the report and replied in the affirmative, with perfect tranquillity.

"Then you no longer fear a riot? You did eight days ago, however, if I am to believe what you have written."

"Monsieur Magalas said publicly in a café that the country would rise."

"That's all right, my good fellow," said Reygnac, meanwhile having decided as to the value of the officer who stood before him. "At present I have no more orders; you may go."

"Pardon, Monsieur le sous-préfet," said Bongrand making a grand effort. "I belong to the third class, and receive 1,800 francs

salary, added to that, I have 40 or 50 francs, fees for disinterments. I am married, the father of a family. It costs dear to live in Montescourt."

"And you wish to be promoted? Very well, I will make a note of it. At present, I have work to do; we will talk together later on."

Bongrand had hardly left, when Prosper re-entered with a card—"Boehmer, Lieutenant of the Gendarmes."

"Good day, Monsieur le sous-préfet," said the officer, in full dress, with a pronounced Alsatian accent, extending his large hand to the new functionary as if he had known him for years. "At last! you have arrived! I am anxious to have my instructions; I suppose that you have brought them. It is time to go to work. When shall we begin?"

"Instructions?" said Gaston somewhat astonished. "I have none. Nobody has given me any. What the devil would you do? Fire upon the people?"

"Now then, Monsieur de Reygnac, we know who you are. If the Minister sends us a man with your ideas and your name, it is not to

continue in the footsteps of M. Lasserre, your predecessor. All the conservatives, and I declare to you that I am one of the number, expect to see a change. Will you make a bet, that Magalas will not sleep at home to-night?"

"Upon my honor, he will make a great mistake, my dear lieutenant; I repeat it, we do not think of imprisoning anybody. We shall take no violent measures. Good gracious! how fast you go at it!"

"I think you may confide in me, monsieur, my opinions are known to all Montescourt and elsewhere. The marshall can count upon me; I have been ten years in service and when the elections are over—"

"You hope for the other shoulder strap?"

"To be sure! I have a large family, and a lieutenant's pay hardly suffices in a city where the food is so dear."

"All alike!" thought Gaston when he was alone. "The question that all these fellows understand best is their own advancement. But who comes now?"

It is Godelin, the postmaster; he wears a black coat, with an enormous cross which covers all one side of his breast. The bullet

which carried away his right arm, left a portion of it, just sufficient to hold, pressed against his right arm-pit, a large gold-headed cane, when the left hand had other duties.

“Monsieur le sous-préfet,” said he, “my wife is in delicate health, and I feared she would pass a sleepless night, if I did not clear myself in your eyes. You saw me talking with your predecessor; that I did from duty, rest assured—I would do the like to you, should the same misfortune overtake you.”

“Granted in advance,” said Reygnac bowing.

“But,” continued Godelin, “Monsieur le sous-préfet would be wrong to conclude by these marks of simple politeness, that I am not animated by a sincere devotion to the present politics; I left an arm in Crimea, and a good record in the regiment. You could never tarnish it. Monsieur, the father of a family with four children to maintain, four daughters—”

“Rest easy,” replied Gaston, who could hardly keep from laughing at hearing the same expressions used by the others, “I understand the difficulties of certain positions. Go and

reassure Madame Godelin and present my compliments to her; oh, by the way, you have not asked for a promotion?"

"No," said the postmaster very gravely, "I shall be pensioned off next year, and my removal will amount to more than my increase of salary; all that I ask is to be let alone, but the government can count on me within the limits of my province."

Left to himself at last, the young official finished looking over the records left by his predecessor; it did not take long, for most of the drawers were empty, the ashes in the fireplace told what had become of their contents. Back of one, he found a yellowed paper which had slipped there by chance, without doubt. It was a love letter, not dated, simply signed with an initial. The style was touching in its simplicity, the spelling fair, but not irreproachable, the ideas had an idyllic freshness. Was it Lasserre or another who had inspired in the romantic Montescurian this tender feeling?

Alas! the postscript destroyed these illusions. He found a "Du Barry" in this "Louise de la Vallière." The postscript said: "The roads which lead to our country home

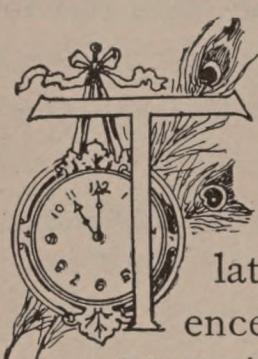
are always full of ruts; one word from you and they will be smooth as garden paths. Say the word quickly; I promise you many thanks."

With a sceptical smile Reygnac burned the letter in the flame of his candle.

In Paris, thought he, presents support love, here, love mends the roads.

With this unromantic reflection, Monsieur Reygnac went to bed.

CHAPTER III.



HE next morning at eleven o'clock, Gaston arrived at the county town. A few minutes later he was ushered into the presence of his chief, by the door keeper.

M. Petitot du Villars, préfet du——, considered that he had given proof of good taste in calling himself "Monsieur du Villars," and his wife did not take offence if, at a ball, some young supernumerary, impressed by her noble walk and majestic shoulders, called her "Madame la Countess."

Petitot du Villars had the misfortune to be a creature of the Empire, a misfortune largely compensated for by the assistance of an intelligent wife. So the family prospered. The 4th of September found them in the sous-préfecture; the 16th of May, they were at the head of the department. They were not rich, far from it, but they had succeeded in a short

time, in giving the préfecture the reputation of being a house where one could amuse one's self. This made people, outside of politics, bow down to them; hair-dressers, pastry cooks, milliners, and the unmarried young ladies, with all their families.

"Good day, my dear colleague," said Villars, affecting to ignore, in the intimacy between Reygnac and himself, all superiority, "you are very good to have responded so quickly to my bidding. What do you think of Montescourt?"

"It is an ugly city, eight hours' ride from Paris; I suspect that it lies upon a river, as it seems to me that I crossed a bridge. One thing is sure, that they have a newspaper printed by a most disagreeable man. I arrived last evening; I slept as well as one could upon a hard mattress. The three or four persons in office, that I have seen, seemed to be in perfect accord, each wished to be promoted."

"And you?" said the préfet laughing.

"I, oh, I deserved it. I am nominated sous-préfet without my ever having done anything. They owe me something, though, for the inconvenience I have undergone."

“ You are a new beginner in this career? ”

“ As green as one possibly can be. It was my mother’s idea. I am twenty-nine years old; I ride well, and I remember having passed my examination in law. I do not deny that I have committed many follies in my life, one of the greatest was whilst at Patay—I placed myself in such a position as to receive a ball which very nearly ended my days. I know how to spell. I am serious when I set about it, and I wish to begin to work, as much from duty as respect. As to my political opinions, I hasten to tell you that I am——”

“ Oh! my dear fellow, who cares what you are? The essential thing is to know what you are not, and then, you are not required to proclaim it from the house tops. It is fortunate that you came to me before speaking to anybody else. Upon my word! you would have commenced with a profession of faith; we are here to prevent that.”

“ Meanwhile one must say something.”

“ It is well to speak the language of the times, for each new régime has its own vocabulary. All our authority is comprised in one word, we are the servants of the marshal.

We uphold the politics and the government of the marshal. We must sustain the marshal's candidates. With these three sentences you know as much as I, and you can get over the most difficult situations; but if you swerve from that, you are lost. Now let me present you to Madame du Villars, who waits lunch for us."

"But, monsieur, you have given me no instructions."

"You too! All my sous-préfets have asked for instructions; that is all that they say. What would you do with my instructions? Did you never read the story of a soldier who cried out in the midst of a battle, 'I have taken a prisoner, but he will not come with me.' Are you sure that you will be able to make them follow my instructions?"

"Well! one can always try."

"My dear fellow, the Government is like a theatre. Show the public a painted canvass and say to them, 'They are murdering someone behind there.' 'Here is an earthquake.' Be serious, bend your head, have the air of being filled with mysterious orders, and everybody will say, 'These people know what they

are about!' This is the essential thing. As for the rest, come what may!"

"That is what they call singing 'la Bénédiction des Poignards' to the air of 'Everybody for himself and God for all.'"

"You have hit it; some other day we will talk more seriously. Now let us go to luncheon."

"Willingly," replied Reygnac; "but you asked me to tell you of the electoral situation."

"I asked you to come that people might know that you had arrived; when you return to-night you will be supposed to have your pockets full of documents; after all, as intelligent as you are, I should not be surprised if you already had something of importance to tell me. That will come later; meanwhile, let us join my wife."

On the garden steps sat Madame du Villars, reading the *Figaro*. A lady about forty years old, very fashionable, and agreeable enough when she thought it useful to please. Not pretty enough to give umbrage to the County beauties. Her father was Councillor of State under the Empire. He was conspic-

uous for issuing certain decrees which the Chancellor of Lamoignon did not sign. I understand her mother was a beauty of the second class, a devoted, if not a faithful wife, and had been the means of her husband becoming President of the section and various other posts of honor, but, says the chronicle, she did not make him rich, thanks to her pronounced taste for dress and display. Accordingly their young daughter Sidonie had for her dowry only her good name, a certain knowledge of the world, and a real talent for the comedy of social life. She was praised more than once at Fontainebleau or at Compiègne.

All these advantages had, at twenty-five years of age, procured for her only ball partners. In the winter of 1869, an illustrious personage promised the gold-headed cane of a sous-préfecture of the first class to the one who gathered her from under a crown of orange blossoms. From that moment people sought this Atlanta, and Lent was hardly ended when the young Petitot du Villars, head clerk in the office of a préfecture in the Antipodes, put on for the first time a beautiful silver em-

broidered coat in a pretty village, three hours' ride from Paris, after the preliminary formalities commanded by Sidonie's patron. Du Villars was not unknown; already they spoke of him for a better position, when the 4th of September came and took away this position, which they had forgotten to guarantee in the contract.

The next day the family disappeared as suddenly as into a trap. You might have found them with very little trouble, wandering from uncle to cousin, lunching upon the friendship of one, dining upon the pity of others, which is no way to get rich. Successively the old sous-préfet tried journalism, farming, banking, and wine brokerage, struggling bravely against the hardships of fate and debts. During this time his wife was on the road to Paris in a cab, oftener in an omnibus, to cultivate her acquaintances—a culture in which a young woman who is good-looking risks a great deal.

How she managed it is a question which concerns only her husband. What is certain is, that he was one of the first batch to furnish préfets the 16th of May, and that the department of—— was given to a man full of experi-

ence, devoid of prejudice and married to a superior woman; I know of more than one out of these forty-five or forty-six departments, that did not have a similar chance.

The time when Madame du Villars rode in an omnibus had passed. In a few days she was given pretty dresses, a fine house, a well-kept coupé and had the appearance of a rich woman.

All this for 25,000 francs! The hardest part was to wait until the end of the first month for the 2,500 francs salary which this lucky day ought to bring them.

In the present state of civilization some will give you, on account of your duties, or title, a pair of horses on credit, who would laugh you in the face if you tried to borrow five louis.

Assuredly, Reygnac, well aware of the difficulties of certain positions, never suspected that the elegant lady who offered him her hand in such a friendly manner, had been, that same morning, in a cold perspiration whilst casting her eyes over the cook's account book. Nothing could be fresher, prettier, or more restful than this charming lady, with her handsome gown, pretty slippers, and well-

dressed hair, comfortably seated in the inevitable gilded arm-chair, covered with red damask, a little worn on the seams.

"At last!" exclaimed she merrily, "you are here! You are the only one of the sous-préfets that I do not know yet, and the one that I wish to know the most."

"O madame," said Gaston, "what would my colleagues say if they heard you?"

"Bah! they would say nothing, they are good fellows, good officers, so my husband says, but common people, like my gardener. And then they are all married! I am certain to never see them. So, I count upon you to fill all of their places; you will have your room here, and will come here to amuse yourself when you are tired of Montescourt, that is to say, at any time. I warn you that I am the one who will give the minister reports concerning you; therefore, be agreeable and make love to me a little when we are in company."

"And when there is nobody around?"

"Then we will talk quietly like good friends. We will become Parisians again. In the presence of our superior officers we must become provincial in the extreme."

"Madame, lunch is served," announced at that moment a most correct butler.

"Let us go," said Madame du Villars rising from her chair. Taking Reygnac's arm, she said in a low voice, "Do not speak of politics before Basil. We hired him from my husband's predecessor and suspect him of carrying reports to the Liberal newspapers of this place."

The luncheon was more attractive than substantial; elegantly served, and called to mind similar repasts which the economy of the present time had put in fashion under the pretext of gentility, in the newly-born fashionable society at the capital. Fresh eggs, chops, asparagus, two cups of tea and plenty of flowers.

The conversation was to the mind what the menu was to the stomach—an unsubstantial living for want of better. They talked of the closed theatres, of the reopened music halls, the races, of good society and bad. Du Villars talked little and ate less. He took, when seated at the tabel, a package of powders, ate without appetite, like a man attacked with gastralgia; Sidonie looked after him, like a

wife who loved her husband, and knew that she lost her rights to an annuity if he died before his time. This astonishing woman knew everything, or at least could talk on all subjects, using expressions rarely original, but always witty. As for Gaston, he could hardly realize where he was. The 16th of May, the elections, the sous-préfecture of Montescourt, all seemed like a dream.

As to Madame du Villars, she looked like twenty-five different ladies with whom he had eaten fresh eggs and listened to their gossip. He really enjoyed himself, for his wit and animation were not yet dampened and congealed by the country and government. He showed himself to be a brilliant talker.

After luncheon, the préfet retired to his office to attend to an urgent despatch. His wife and Reygnac seated themselves on the veranda, she lazily stretched out in a large rolling chair, he upon a camp stool in front of her. Sidonie took a cigarette, made him light one, and without hesitation said, "Monsieur de Reygnac, you are a charming man."

"I, madame!" replied he bowing, "But"—
"Yes," continued she, "charming. You are

witty, with a natural elegance, a talent for entertaining ladies. You are an accomplished gentleman; I believe, too, that you have a substantial education. Only I wonder how it ever happened that the office of sous-préfet was offered to you and that you accepted it."

"Mon Dieu, madame," responded Reygnac, a little surprised at the compliment, "between us, I asked for it, or rather I should say that the whole thing was done without me; I ought to tell you that my mother ——"

"Oh! I know, the Countess de Reygnac has a most practical mind and unerring penetration. She knows that idleness is the mother of vice; that nobody plays baccarat at Montescourt; that the fashionable ladies are remarkable for their ugliness, the others by their absence. In short, thanks to your relatives, thanks to the powerful influence of friendship, your mother is welcome to the Élysée. She has only to say the word to put you into the Bastile, or in other words, to send you to Montescourt; this is true, is it not?"

"Zounds! madame," said Reygnac a little piqued, "you are complimentary! You are well informed about me and my family."

"Do I receive you any the worse for that? Yes, it is true, I have informed myself, and make no mystery of it. I am of the old school, and I know my business. They should have told you of it."

"Pardon me, madame, I did not know until I came here, whether my chief was married or not."

"Decidedly, you lack experience. Thank God! that he has given you a préfet who will look after your political education, very much neglected until now. Without impertinence I ask, what did you expect to do?"

"Well, madame, to become préfet as soon as possible. I have commenced work seriously. I shall work hard and if I go out with honor from the present enterprise —"

"Ah! you have come to that. You! A préfet of the third Restoration; that is the height of your ambition? Ah, fie, Monsieur le Count, is it a fact, that your mother's son is a candid man?"

"If I have accepted a government office, it was not with the expectation of becoming admiral some day."

"That is wrong, for you will be an admiral

before a Préfet. If I were in your place, I should not regard it as far distant. There are heiresses in your county, and I know of one whose guardian will soon have need of you."

Just then, Basil appeared with a card upon a tray.

"I will receive him," said Madame du Villars, throwing away her cigarette. At the same time she struck the attitude of a great lady who sits for her portrait, and instantaneously disguised her Parisian face, which speaks with the eyes, nose and all, and assumed the impenetrable mask of a political woman.

Basil announced:

"Monsieur le commandant Martinval."

This person made his appearance, rigid, important, and solemn. One could never imagine a face less military-looking than the commandant's. He would have been easily taken for a retired merchant; one would have been only half in the wrong. Martinval, formerly assistant to a steward, had resigned to marry the daughter of a very wealthy tradesman. He had formerly commanded the Militia, and did that very well, that is, without losing a man, only by sickness. As his

name was popular in the surrounding district, it was the one proposed as candidate of the moral order at the coming elections.

Madame du Villars presented the men to each other in a very dignified manner.

"Ah! Ah! Monsieur le sous-préfet," said Martinval, examining Reygnac as a general would a new recruit, "it is you, then, who go to fight for the good cause at Montescourt?"

Reygnac, profiting already by the advice and example of his clever mentor, assumed a profound air, which was far from becoming, and replied:

"Monsieur, in the struggle which is preparing, we ourselves, political servants, point the cannons, but it is the local influence which charges them."

"Bravo!" cried Martinval. "That is very well said and I congratulate Montescourt. You express capitally what I said yesterday to madame. To discriminate and select local influence. It all lies in a nut-shell. But on this matter, what are the views of our minister?"

Gaston was not acquainted with the minister, having merely met him on the sidewalk in the streets on Monceau, and Madame du

Villars suspected it, so much so, that she felt uneasy. Happily Gaston, who was not a fool, answered very gravely:

“Monsieur, the minister meditates; he studies. He is a very intelligent man, and one who, with his very tranquil air—will astonish people; I am sorry that I am not permitted to say more——”

“No, hang it! be discreet; you would be a fool to divulge your plans in advance. As for ourselves, we will march like old soldiers without asking where we are to go, meanwhile we half guess it. How is our dear marshal?”

“Very well, I thank you, although I found him looking very tired the other day, when I saw him on horseback in the Bois.”

“The devil!” said Martinval. “He works too hard. There is a man that I admire, monsieur. If he had many friends as devoted as I! Did he speak to you of the projects which busy me, or at least of those that busy themselves for me?”

Madame du Villars thought it prudent to interrupt.

“Only think, my dear commandant, would you believe that our young associate comes

here without being minutely informed about our candidates? Just as you came in, he was getting ready to go to your house, to assure you of his interest in your success, and of the part that he intends to take."

'Do not trouble yourself,' said Martinval, "I consider your visit as paid, and shall not forget you, if I attain the office, as I hope, provided our préfet shows intelligence, for one must take into consideration here a certain number of manufactories, where the hostile element is large. We must lead these fellows with a high hand. Repeat this to your husband, my dear madame."

"And what do you think of Montescourt?" asked Reygnac.

"Oh! that is very different. There it is the peasants who hold the rope. Loidreau is a lucky fellow, all the more as he knows where to get the 40,000 francs for his election."

"A large fortune, then?" asked the young man, who heard for the first time the name of his future candidate.

"For his part, he has not a sou, but he is the guardian of a nephew and niece, who have about ten millions."

Madame du Villars glanced quickly at Gaston, as much as to say, "Listen, it will be worth your while."

"You have not been to Fresnau yet?" continued Martinval.

"My dear commandant," remarked Sidonie, "our young sous-préfet has been at his post only twenty-four hours, but it will be good fortune for him to be told about his deputy, by a man who knows him as well as you do."

"Ah! yes, I know him! The real Loidreau, late Justice of Peace, had a younger brother, who left here for Paris when very young. They say that he had only three francs in his pocket; it is very likely; one thing is sure, that he carried his trowel on his back, and with that trowel he built two or three bridges, a theatre, a hospital, and a good share of the Boulevard Haussmann."

"I believe that he worked also on his own accord," said Sidonie.

"Certainly. The hotel at the corner of Avenue de Messine is his, or at least his children's, besides, he bought Fresnau, after having married out of gratitude the daughter of the architect who first started him in the world,

and who died without a fortune; for this Napoleon Loidreau was a worthy man. Henriette was born a year after; she is twenty to-day. Everything went smoothly for these people, until the poor contractor died suddenly in 1874. This was the commencement of their misfortunes. His wife pined away with grief, and to hasten the end, she was in a delicate condition after an interval of sixteen years. The doctors sent her to Cannes with her daughter, but she took the fancy, a sick woman's whim, like Rachel, to go to Cairo. More fortunate than the great tragedienne, she returned from there the next year, cured, and the mother of a little boy, as pretty as a cupid. When I say that she was cured, one must understand that physically she was well, but mentally a perfect wreck. She raved more and more every day, until at last they were obliged to put her into an asylum.'

"Poor creature" said Madame du Villars, "she was an excellent and very agreeable lady; I saw her often in Paris before the war. Her husband was one of the most intelligent members of the Majority. They entertained a great deal."

"During this time," resumed Martinval, "his elder brother continued to be Justice of Peace, he lost his place the 4th of September, and opened, in order to make a living, a lawyer's office in Montescourt, for he was proud and would not ask a penny from his brother. When the brother died, the late Justice of Peace presented himself to the electors, and such was the influence of his younger brother, that he was chosen at once—upon the sole name of Loidreau; after which he installed himself at Fresnau with his two wards. So that, having no money himself, nor any from his wife, he supports the style of a man who has 400,000 francs income."

"His niece is the best match in the county," affirmed Sidonie, wishing to make Martinval talk of her.

"I agree with you, she is a superb creature too, only she does not look as if she was good-tempered, and it is not often that one sees her laugh, which is easily understood. She has already refused many fine offers; to speak plainly she is in no hurry to marry, for she is sure never to be an old maid unless she wishes."

Martinval left; Reygnac laughingly said to Madame du Villars: "A singular conversation! I must prepare myself to take notes for my report to the Minister. I have learned only one thing, thanks to you, and that is, that our candidate is the uncle of a pretty girl who has a handsome fortune."

"My dear sous-préfet, if you can help to nominate Loidreau, it will be a great thing for you, but if you marry his niece it will be still better. Now, go and fight for the good cause, as Martinval said. Only while we are alone, let me repeat to you the words of a Belgian Captain of Police, addressing his men just as they were about to attack a mob: "Think that the country has its eye upon you, but do not forget that your horse belongs to yourself."

CHAPTER IV.

THE next morning Léfèvre entered his chief's office and announced that a certain number of commercial men from Montescourt wished to see him.

"Do you know what they want? If it is to talk of protection or free exchange, they come a little too early, for I tell you frankly."

"Oh!" giggled Léfèvre, "they come about more practical questions. These gentlemen simply come to ask the trade of the sous-préfecture for provisions."

"But my cook will arrange all that, when I find time to get one; send them away."

"Allow me to advise you not to do it. It is a more important thing than you imagine and somewhat more difficult. At Montescourt they are very suspicious, and more than one magistrate has comprised himself at the outset, by treating the trades-people lightly."

"All right," said Reygnac with resignation, "let them come in,"

Then the march commenced; the butcher from Grand Rue, the first in the city, made known that since the fall of the Empire, all the sous-préfets had purchased their meats of him. He insinuated that, in not doing so, the new functionary would expose himself to the double danger, of alarming all the political party, and of eating second-class beefsteak.

“I have seen in the ante-chamber,” added he, “one of my rivals who comes, doubtless, for the same purpose that I do. Permit me to warn you, monsieur, that this man is clerical and reactionary, notwithstanding that he kills only half an ox a week.”

“The dickens!” said Reygnac astounded; “would it be indiscreet to ask what becomes of the other half?”

“It is a form of speech of our party. One kills the half of an animal, when he is in partnership with a fellow who takes the other half for his shop. Houses of little importance are reduced to that in small cities.”

“I am Ringuenoire, the butcher, from rue de l’Église,” said the second candidate, introduced in his turn; “my store is not as magnificent as Prunier’s I know, but perhaps my

mutton is as good as his; his shop is substantial, it would be bad taste to deny it, only he is a thorough radical. He takes the *Democrat* and is one of the electoral agents of M. Magalas. To whom do you think the new Government will be conservative if the sous-préfecture continues to patronize this store? I, monsieur, furnish all the neighboring mansions, the priests, and all that there is of moderation in the Municipal Council; I send my son to the Brothers' school, and you may count upon me election day."

Reygnac replied that he would study the question with all the care it merited, and dismissed Ringuenoire, who departed after leaving his price list. Before going home he appeared once more to say, "When Monsieur le Sous-Préfet wishes a calf's head, he shall have it in preference to everybody, only letting me know the night before."

Exasperated by these interruptions, the unhappy Gaston prepared to lock the door, but Lefèvre, having had experience, begged him to hold out to the end. "Believe me," said he, "it will not be lost time; before night these men will have gone through the entire city,

and your reputation will be made in one sense or the other."

This little reception then continued. After the butchers came successively, grocers, bakers, wine merchants, all dressed in their Sunday clothes, cleanly shaved. One said, "he had a Mexican medal," another that "his pastry cook came from Noumea." A third that "his wife was first cousin to Madame Loidreau." As to the two wine merchants, the first, who made his own wine, had shaken hands with a great man one day at Cahors. The second furnished wine to the clergy of that county to be used at mass, and had a son who was treasurer in the Ecclesiastical Seminary.

It was like this until eleven o'clock. At this moment, Gaston, worn out and distracted with fatigue, realized for the first time the task he had undertaken, and asked himself if he had not better take the return train for Paris. He was reminded that he had just time to put on his uniform for the official reception to be held.

Here, the list was different. Those whose daily bread was at stake, and who knew noth-

ing of politics, hesitatingly advanced toward the mantel, were Gaston stood playing with the tassels of his scarf. You would have said that they were a band of raw recruits fresh from fighting in the woods, and scenting the air to know from which side the gunshots came. They bowed to the ground, and when they reached the door, went out without having raised their eyes to their new chief.

Some of them, already, noted for their reactionary opinions, proceeded to burn their vessels, and to risk a declaration of their devotion to the "marshal's politics."

Still the procession continued; groups of five or six persons successively made their entrance, and like the ballet in an opera, descended toward the foot-lights, whilst the voice of the porter—transformed into an usher, announced them in turns.

The tax collectors, inspectors of highways, the justice of peace and his clerk, also the professors from the college. At Montescourt no troublesome rule of precedence impeded receptions of this kind. They went in as soon as they arrived and nobody thought of raising any objections.

Reygnac was doomed to a feat of veritable skill, for he had to guess all the qualifications proclaimed at the door, and to improvise, without interruption, pleasant phrases adapted to the occupation of each. You would have thought that he had been aided by the perusal of an encyclopædia. After having asked the primary inspector as to the number among the enlisted who knew how to read, he asked the physician about the children supported by local means and their nurses, of the general protector of the forests about the dogs who were running rampant through the place. People found in general that he was conversant with the ways of the world.

So far, all went well, but it was noised about that Magalas was coming, at the head of the Minority Council, to protest against the late occurrences, but whether the report was false or the fierce patriot changed his mind—if he protested, it was by his absence.

After a late and hurried luncheon, Gaston threw himself into the only barouche that was to be hired in the place, and gave himself up to returning the calls that he had missed. Until six o'clock in the evening he left cards,

shook hands and heard the same questions asked for the fiftieth time.

"Well, Monsieur le Sous-Préfet, do you think that you are going to like Montescourt?"

Now and then some comical incident broke the tiresome monotony of his visits. A city councillor, who was a baker, received him in his working costume, his chest naked like an Indian Fakir. A judge of the Tribune, who was exceedingly near-sighted, did not recognize him without his uniform, and took him for a commercial traveller selling Provence oils. Finally when Reygnac called, in consequence of a regrettable misunderstanding, at the door of the Registrar of Mortgages, he passed the parish priest coming from administering extreme unction to this person, who died whilst the visitor left his card.

From which this witty joke appeared in the next number of the *Democrat*, and was called very bright, even by those who did not partake of the political principles of Magalas.

"The new sous-préfet of the moral order did not succeed in bringing good luck to the conservatives of Montescourt."

Having paid all his visits and wishing to do something useful, Gaston seated himself in his arm chair and, calling Léfèvre, told him he wished—without losing a moment's time—to begin at once the study of administrative affairs. Smiling behind his gold glasses, Léfèvre left the room, returning soon bending under the weight of a pile of documents.

"If you wish to rely upon my judgment," said he, "we will begin with the most urgent in election time, applications for licenses to open liquor saloons."

"Why not call them all simply wine-shops?" asked the young beginner.

"That would not be statesmanship. We must not use expressions like everybody else—a road, a curé, a cemetery, a drunkard. In using longer expressions and less known, we assert our prestige. We express the same ideas by this turn of the sentences—a road of communication, a minister of religion, a field of interment, an individual in a state of intoxication."

Reygnac was on the point of asking his secretary how he would express idiotic in administrative terms, but he refrained.

"I should prefer to commence with other things," said he; "you ought to have some bridge to construct, some school to reëstablish, or some paupers to keep from starving."

"Monsieur," said Léfèvre gravely, "one tavern-keeper rightly thinking—that is—as we do, will gain more votes in a Sunday than twelve school-masters would in a year; but if I was in your place, I know very well what I should do; I should let business rest and go to Fresnau. What is the use of pleasing the whole district, if the deputy is dissatisfied with you?"

"Upon my faith! you are right. Take away all these papers. To-morrow I will go to see Monsieur Loidreau."

Probably this hardened Parisian would have yielded less quickly, if he had not thought that in calling upon Loidreau he had a chance of seeing the beautiful Henriette.

During three whole days his eyes had not been delighted by the sight of but one pretty woman. The next after, he left for Fresnau in the famous barouche.

CHAPTER V.



RESNAU is a beautiful dwelling, nearly new, of square shape with a wing on each side, slightly jutting forward. The mansard roof is covered with slate and on each end has lightning conductors, like those of a country house. It corresponded in all its parts to the style of houses built by hundreds in a dozen places near Paris, alike uninviting and commodious. A complete description of the style of the architecture of the second empire. Hot water pipes heated the whole house, at the top of which was a reservoir of water supplied by a steam engine. At six hundred feet from the house, concealed by a massive wall, stood the stable and carriage house. The park, containing about one hundred and fifty acres, crossed by a river, is kept like the woods of Boulogne,

which it resembles, picturesque and tiresome. One found there conservatories, bathing, pheasants, and waterfalls. One looked in vain for a spot two hundred feet square where one could escape this excess of the beautiful, which seemed to nudge one to say, "Look at me!" Without going away from his own home, Napoleon Loidreau could hunt, fish, sail boats and gather pine-apples. He had collected everything—he had foreseen all save death, who had crushed him one night, as he lay in his own chamber, under red damask curtains which cost fifty francs a yard. People spoke very little about him; but still less of his wife, if possible, who was shut up in some Insane Asylum.

One day, the former justice of peace had found himself, with one stroke of the wand, installed amidst these splendors, which he had admired formerly, as a grisette admires the shop windows. He lived in the midst of this luxury, after the fashion of Spanish monks, who pass their lives in a cathedral to watch over treasures which will never belong to them. But he consoled himself in thinking that his guardianship was not nearly finished. His

niece Henriette was, to be sure, nearly of age. As to the young heir, he was only three years old, and at Loidreau's age, eighteen years was a long bail.

After driving for an hour, Reygnac's barouche stopped before a gate, the exact copy of one in the Parc Monceau. The visitor sent in his card. With a profound bow the porter, wearing a red waistcoat—announced that Monsieur le Deputy was at home and opened the gates. Then, while the carriage drove up the long avenue, a telegraph wire which connected the porter's lodge with the mansion, transmitted to the head of the house the name and title of the person he was to receive (at this time, the telephone was hardly yet known).

When Gaston was ushered into the library, which was finished in black oak and antique silver, he found Loidreau at work with his secretary, in the midst of a complete mise en scène.

"Leave us, Monsieur Perrin," said the Deputy, advancing toward his guest with a majestic walk, and very solemnly extending his hand. "Monsieur le Sous-Préfet," articulated he in a nasal tone, "I was expecting you." The

count trembled imperceptibly. This was not the way exactly that he was ordinarily received, even amongst deputies who had no need of him.

But within three days he had learned many new things!

"Monsieur," replied he, with a slight smile, "I thought that it was proper——"

"At the same time necessary," interrupted Loidreau smiling; "we have many things to talk over together, and as we are hurried for time, we will, if you say so, do away with all preliminaries. I will not say, monsieur, that I asked for your nomination, since I had not the honor of knowing you, but when consulted by the Minister, having no candidate in whom I was personally interested, I accepted you with pleasure, when I knew with whom I had to deal."

Gaston bowed. "Accepted" appeared to him at first a little hard, but the rest of the sentence was irreproachable.

"We will lose no time," continued Loidreau, "in considering what is being done in other parts of France. For us, France is Montescourt, "And the district of Montescourt is

your election," said Reygnac, half satirically, half seriously.

"Certainly," replied the Deputy with perfect composure, "you have nothing against me personally, I think. We must have a candidate; whether his name is Peter or John, what matters, so long as he wins? All admit that I shall succeed. Observe, monsieur, that a good number of your colleagues, less fortunate than yourself, have to struggle in spite of an acquired position. For you, the only point is to keep what you have. Let us, if you will, look over our forces and those of the enemy."

"Magalas!" said Reygnac laughing.

"Yes, Magalas. You know already personally what one may expect from the courtesy of this person. He is an adversary who hits with his fists, but a blow from the fist kills as well as a sword thrust. He is not formidable; yet we should be wrong to scorn him; I, monsieur, do not owe my political position to myself; I inherited it from my brother, of whom you have heard, no doubt. Ah! poor fellow! If he were in my place you might rest easy!"

"Monsieur," protested Gaston politely, "I

have already understood with regard to personal value and intelligence——”

“ You are very kind, but I had no fortune, while my brother was the richest man in the county. You must be aware of the respect peasants have for riches. My nephew and my niece will each have 200,000 pounds income. I need not tell you that you are in my nephew’s house at this moment. My niece owns the Hotel in Paris. As for myself, my first election cost me 50,000 francs, this one will cost a little more. The result, in three years, you see it here!”

“ At least you have something to show for your money. I have a friend who ruined himself in elections and is not even in the Municipal Council of his own village.”

The two men talked together for a long time, and took a liking to each other; Reygnac thought that his first visit would be a short one; but six o’clock in the evening he was still in Loidreau’s office. It is true that the time had been well occupied, for the new sous-préfet had learned more of his surroundings in this one interview, than the whole of the preceding three days.

"This is enough for to-day," said the deputy; "pardon me if I have taken advantage of you, but it is the first time since my first election that I have talked with one of my sous-préfets. The last would not bow to me in the street. Now, I will present you to the ladies and you will dine with us."

Gaston, more curious than ever to see Mme. Loidreau and above all her niece, murmured the usual objections in such an instance.

"Come! do not be ceremonious," said M. Loidreau in a good-natured tone; "you are a caller and your costume is excused in advance."

Reygnac, who was called in Paris the "exquisite Reygnac," slightly smiled at hearing these words. But when, a half-hour later, he entered the brilliantly-lighted dining room, although outside it was daylight, he understood that he had been asked under extenuating circumstances to dine otherwise than in evening dress.

The deputy and his secretary, who were pomaded and starched, with patent leathers and button-hole bouquets, had the appearance of gentlemen who were to spend their evening at the opera,

Madame Loidreau, daughter of a rich farmer at Montescourt, married twenty-five years before to the young Justice of Peace, was dressed according to her usual custom in a black silk dress; but what silk! it would stand alone, it was so rich and heavy. At each spoonful of soup the good lady carried to her lips, it made a rustling which seemed to say, "They make no better in Lyons."

Mlle. Loidreau merited largely her reputation for beauty. She was a wonderful brunette of a dead shade, with straight lustrous bands of hair, which so few ladies can wear on account of the tint, which was as dark as a "raven's wing," a low forehead, large black eyes and red lips which are indispensable to make this manner of dressing the hair becoming. Likewise there were not in all Paris three ladies who carried themselves in such an irreproachable manner.

Henriette Loidreau had these advantages—an exquisite figure, a little too-long waisted perhaps—it was the fashion in 1877—but small enough to clasp with two hands, and expanding above like a Greek vase. Her dress, a maize foulard and white lace, slightly opened

at the neck, was made like those that came from a dress-maker in Paris, whom fashionable ladies were beginning to employ.

The great fault of this beautiful creature was, she had not the air of a candid young lady. It was not that she had the eccentricities that so many heiresses of her kind affect. She spoke seldom, not haughtily, and without a trace of slang. She was not absorbed with the idea of being a “fast” young lady—an ambition which manifests itself amongst romps of sixteen years of age. She did not seem to belong to the tribe of “blue stockings,” neither was she a “sportswoman” or a “flirt.” She talked quietly, replying to the others, and leaving them time to answer, without laughing incessantly at what she said, or at the others. She ate her beef with the stately appetite of a person who finds it done to a turn—and knows that it is she who pays for it. Moreover, nothing marked the air of “it is mine,” if it was not now and then a strangely imperious aspect, and the prompt obedience of some inattentive servant.

Among the persons who were there, each treated Reygnac in a different manner, accord-

ing to his education, situation, or personal feelings.

The deputy called him “Monsieur le sous-préfet.” His wife gave him his title, “Monsieur le Count.” Henriette confined herself to “Monsieur;” as for Perrin, he did not speak to Gaston, as he considered that he had stolen his place from him. For since the 16th of May, this articled lawyer, picked up by Loidreau, whilst hanging about the courts, upon the recommendation of the head of the party, had considered beyond doubt that his patron would ask for him the office of sous-préfet of Montescourt. This young man, as we shall see later, had pictured to himself still more ambitious ideas.

Justin Loidreau made alone, or nearly so, all the efforts at conversation. It was always so when he received a new guest, not that he was a great talker, but he feared the slips in oratory, or as he said in private, “slips of the tongue,” of his wife, and God knows he had reason to.

Sometimes he made, himself, stupid blunders. It could not be otherwise, having been Justice of Peace in a little village for twenty-

five years, after having learned Latin with an uncle, a curé in a little country hole. On these unlucky occasions, Henriette had a way of looking at her uncle which said to him, "danger," and suppressed him at once. During the first of their living together, the household of the elder Loidreau gave much annoyance to the young orphan, and nobody would imagine the trouble she took to make perfect establishments of Fresnau and the Boulevard Haussmann; but as far as her uncle was concerned, she had exaggerated the condition of affairs. The deputy who had once worn his slippers all day, disappeared; he became a correct man of the world, ready to die of hunger sooner than not to dine in his dress suit, even in the country. He would have refused a letter stuffed with bank notes, presented by his valet otherwise than on a silver salver. Still more, if one could believe the *Democrat*, the deputy's bed was made every morning by a servant in white gloves. Loidreau never suspected the number of votes that he lost, in consequence of this assertion, not denied.

Whilst the roast was passed around from a

massive silver platter, Justin, a kind man at heart, and wishing to put the count at his ease, said to him, " You must come often and take us by surprise, like to-day, and without ceremony; you will give these ladies pleasure, for they see no high life in the country."

Henriette looked at her uncle to warn him to be careful what he said; but already Gaston replied with his most serious air, " You are, monsieur, of the same mind as the Marquise in 'La Gageure Imprévue'—in the country one takes what he finds.

Then to continue the series—Aunt Loidreau, not wishing to be less polite than her husband, said with her most affable air, " And when Monsieur le Count wishes to come to Fresnau, he will only have to send us some word, and we will go for him with our carriage. There are a regiment of horses here that ought to be exercised every day, and they may as well take the road to Montescourt as any other."

Gaston was just ready to reply to her in the same tone as he had to her husband, but this time he was the one to whom the niece looked as much as to say: " Believe me, you had bet-

ter give that up!" So Reygnac replied only by a slight inclination of the head.

A silence of several minutes intervened, Henriette broke it by saying to Gaston:

"Perhaps you know the Barjols, who live about six miles from here?"

"Raoul de Barjols is one of my best friends; but I have never seen his mother, or sister, who live alone upon their estate, and do not often leave the province. Do you see them often, Mlle.?"

"Ah!" you know the Marquis de Barjols," interrupted the deputy, nervously. "I am very glad to know it, for here at least we shall need him. He is a very pleasant man, who unfortunately lives very little among his own people, although he is their mayor. Days when the Municipal Council meets, he comes in the morning and leaves at night. At this rate, you can judge what his influence is."

"Yes," said Henriette, "but to make amends the Marquise de Barjols and Sabine are the main stay of the poor people for miles around. Also I assure you if these ladies could appear at the elections——"

"That is a mistake," interrupted Loidreau,

"gratitude is an agent more than mediocre in such a case. The farmer will naturally refuse his vote to the kind-hearted man, who kept him the day before from starvation, and will give it to the clever fellow, who promises for the coming year the suppression of taxes and division of land."

"Is Mlle. Barjols pretty?" asked Gaston.

"Better than pretty, adorable," replied Henriette, "Ah! the good, happy, enviable creature! One of my greatest troubles is, that we see each other so rarely. We were together at Varenne, and as she was a year or two older, she took me under her protection; we were inseparable, but since—" A sigh singularly mournful finished the sentence. Gaston, somewhat surprised, looked at Henriette; he wanted to ask, "What has happened since?"

Suddenly upon the already sombre face of the young girl a forbidding scowl deepened; Uncle Loidreau had just said to the butler: "Go and inquire if Monsieur Felix is ready to come down."

"I doubt it," said the aunt, who seemed, contrary to her niece, delighted at the very

name; “he was only called in as we sat down at the table and his toilette is not finished.”

The door opened; it was the butler who said solemnly: “Monsieur Felix will be ready in a moment.”

As Gaston was wondering to himself who this inmate could be, who came so late to the table, a superb child, three years old, with naked arms, neck, and legs, emerging from a cloud of lace, appeared led by a nurse.

It was “Monsieur Felix,” the future lord of the mansion, brother of Henriette and successor to the name, already treated with the ceremony of a presumptive heir.

From this moment Gaston could hardly believe that he was with the same persons. The deputy, forgetting the rules of “high life” took the child upon his knee and covered him with kisses, whilst Mme. Loidreau loaded him with sweetmeats.

The child smiled; his beautiful black eyes—like his sister’s—sparkling with health and mischievousness, were fixed with curiosity upon the stranger. M. Perrin himself, the icy secretary, relaxed and tickled the child’s bare neck with a sprig of verbena, taken from the épergne,

the little fellow bursting into peals of laughter.

The excellent Mme. Loidreau who had never had any children of her own, said, turning her honest face toward Gaston: "Have I not a fine nephew, Monsieur le Count?"

The only person who had not moved was Henriette, paler than usual, her red lips slightly parted to allow one to see a line of dazzling enamel, and gathering herself up as if ready to bound, she nervously watched with her eyes the least movement of the persons about the child.

It was only when the nurse led away Felix, that the little creature, satiated with bon-bons and caresses, drew near his sister, whose dark looks had not left him for an instant. Then she gave him a kiss, one only, which was like a flash of lightning, when the little creature went out as if beaten. She let him go without another glance.

Everybody around the table became serious.

"My dear friend," said the deputy, readjusting his white necktie, which was deranged by his ward's little hands, "shall we go and take our coffee on the terrace?"

CHAPTER VI.



BOUT a week after his visit to Fresnau, Gaston went to see the Du Villars.

The préfet talked a great deal to him about the elections, and a little of business; Sidonie questioned him anew about the beautiful Henriette.

"Truly, madame," said Reygnac, "you will make me believe that the minister sent me to Montescourt only to marry; I, like a simpleton and an old soldier, believed that we were here to fight."

"Oh! without doubt, to fight is your duty; but if you find a fortune upon the battle field, I do not see who can prevent your dismounting from your horse, to pick it up. Meanwhile, this little Loidreau, did she please you?"

"She is very beautiful and intelligent, perhaps a little difficult to understand; I noticed

her once or twice with a look like Cleopatra caressing an asp. Then, too, I should have a crazy mother-in-law."

"Yes, but you would have a mother-in-law *shut up*, and it would make you envied by all men. Seriously, this poor lady was a sensible woman; if she lost her mind by her late maternity or the death of her husband, what does it prove? Her daughter's children have nothing to fear, since the birth of Henriette preceded the accident. As to the young Felix, the worst that could happen would be that his nephews would be his heirs."

"Well and good, but why do you think Loidreau wishes to give me his niece?"

"For ten reasons, of which to spare your blushes, I will not give you the list, only the eleventh—which is—because he needs you for his election."

"He does not have the appearance of one who thinks so."

"A Normandy precaution, which depreciates its merchandise. But wait for the least complication, and you will see this pride quickly vanish."

"You are hard upon him, madame."

"And you! you are very dull. Nevertheless, do you blame this worthy man to make sure of his happiness—that is—his election, by giving his niece to a gentleman for a wife, and a countess into the bargain? One word is as good as a hundred; my dear friend, reflect, hold yourself in readiness and if the opportunity presents itself, you may count upon me."

It was not the first time that a marriage for money had been proposed to Reygnac, but until now, they had selected persons so disagreeable in every way, that he had escaped from them, without suing for anything more.

Assuredly Mlle. Loidreau was not one of those from whom a poor young man would wish to save himself, unless he had sworn to marry only one of the highest rank. Now Gaston had not sworn at all, unless it was to marry one that pleased him, and did not seem too much inclined to please others. In the train which took him back to Montescourt he thought of Henriette and loyally admitted that she filled entirely the first part of the programme. As to the second, it was too soon to trouble one's self about that.

As soon as he returned to his office Gaston

had many other things to think of besides marriage. In a single day his table was covered with a thick coating of letters of denunciations and demands for offices. The second class of the district asked for places in the first. There was no office which was not contested like a bill. No petty school-master but whose removal or support was not presented like a question involving the future of France. Gaston saw with dismay the dozens of candidates springing up for every petty office.

When he walked the streets of Montescourt, it would be hard to say which sickened him most, the obsequious smiles, or the hypocritical hand shaking, that he met at every step, or the salutes, cringing, sorrowful, and uncertain, back of which he could always hear this phrase, which is probably the last word of the political interior, "I have four children to maintain!" To verify these denunciations, to study these demands, took several days. It was enough to drive one crazy, for the persons attempted to justify themselves with the energy of despair, and were attacked in their turn. The competitors mutually charged each other with criminal or unworthy actions, and so well,

that Gaston could almost believe that amongst these 45,000 persons he could not find one honest man. It was a mixture, an equal dose, of the comic and horrible. But what rendered the mess complete was the recommendations. Amongst the wise persons, the candidates, without blinding themselves to their own proper merit, protected themselves by the support of some influential person. It is in the same way that a swimmer with little skill attaches himself to a bundle of rattan, as a life preserver. It became necessary, then, to apply himself to the question of valuation, in order to establish a basis for estimating and appointing, that is, a metrical system of protection, agreeing that three general councillors equal one deputy, and six deputies one minister; only it often happens that the protector becomes entangled—voluntarily perhaps—with his protégés in recommending two or three with the same ardor and in the same terms, and as a last resource writes:

“ My dear sous-préfet, X—— begs of me to ask you for this place. As he is an earnest elector, I give him my recommendation, but, between us, you would oblige me by appointing

Z—— who is much more attractive in every way.”

With regard to the administration, properly understood, Reygnac did but little, at first because he had no time, afterward because the administrators themselves cared but little about it. He had to acknowledge at the end of eight days that the “wants of the people” were a myth, or at least that the people did not know of their needs. Those that did feel it, had their grudges, prejudices, and faults. It costs less to appease the ambitions of three greedy persons than to quench the thirst of one drunkard. That is why, in a few words, that the art of governing people is so difficult.

One day when Gaston had been working for two hours at this thankless task, the Marquis de Barjol’s card was brought him.

“Let him come in!” said the poor exile with joy; “and that we may not be disturbed, I am not at home to anybody.”

Raoul entered the sanctuary, and when the door was closed, Reygnac threw himself like a common mortal upon his friend’s neck.

“What ails you?” said the new comer; “the devil take me if I expected such a reception!

I expected to find you already stupefied, ankylosed and old fogyish, bald headed, with whiskers and a stomach; I thought you would give me the tips of your fingers and say, ‘Take a seat, “Monsieur le Maire,”’ for I am mayor of Barjols, unless you have revoked it lately.”

“Listen to me,” said Gaston, “I will strangle you at once, if you say mayor, removals, elections, or the moral order. You cannot know what a state my nerves are in. Ah! my poor friend, it seems to me that I have been made king of Aurania, and that I have been reduced to the society of my subjects for five years. It is a pretty trick that my mother has served me, under the pretext of ‘employing me!’ Tell me of the club, the opera, the Boulevard. Tell me some gossip, bad as you like, I am equal to it; I assure you I have not become hard to please.”

“And this is the way I find you! I who come to make inquiries about your position——”

“My position! hold, would you like to see it? You have only to seat yourself at my desk and read the two or three thousand sheets of

paper you will find there, then you will be satisfied.'

"Upon my honor! one would say that you had heard of politics for the first time in your life. It is the art of cooking, like any other."

"Capital. Cooking is a charming accomplishment in the dining room, but if you had fallen, as I have, into a dark sink where they wash dishes, we should see what you would think of it then."

"You grieve me. I thought you had a stronger stomach. What would you have, my poor friend? It is a duty that you are accomplishing. Think of your future prospects and of your future too."

"You are great in this rôle! I know very well I am doing my duty without that! Meanwhile, I would give three préfectures for one hour's gallop in the lane at Poteaux, or even to seat myself like a bashful countryman, upon a chair under the trees, and watch the people pass by. I would give a pocketbook for one cigar smoked on the balcony at the club after dinner, to see the illuminated green-room of the opera, the lines of gas jets on the Rue de la Paix, the crowded Boulevards. The

country people in disorder. Ah! you have done well to come! I can relieve myself a little."

"What an abominable sous-préfet you make!"

"There you are deceived. I work like a slave. I see everybody. I study the work thoroughly. I do my best to render justice. My predecessor did nothing but play billiards during the day and smoke his pipe in the café during the evening."

"You find that it is nothing! I wager that he regrets it. Look out for yourself, if you prove to be Parisian!"

"I, Parisian? Alas! Look at this long hair, this uncurled moustache. This coat will soon be too narrow for me, for there is no use in denying it, I am getting stouter, although I have no appetite; apropos, you will dine with me?"

The Marquis de Barjols has since told that this dinner was the worst he ever sat down to in his life. The cooking was done by a wretched cook, hired by the day. The wine, bought by the bottle, would have raised the dead. The dishes bore the mark of the hotel

from which they were hired. But Reygnac, full of delight at seeing one of his own kind, did not mind any of these details, whilst the dignity of his valet suffered cruelly. After an attempt to drink some impossible coffee, they lighted their cigars and Raoul broached the veritable object of his visit. He talked about the elections, or rather his own election. At this Gaston uttered an exclamation which strongly resembled a vigorous oath.

Without being disconcerted in the least the marquis persisted. "You know very well that it is not my idea, but my friends of the legitimate board have offered it to me. They protest that my situation in the country——"

"Ah! bless me, this is too much!" interrupted Reygnac, throwing his cigar out of the window. "I needed this to finish me; in the midst of this desert, peopled by savages, an old friend falls from the skies; I clasp him in my arms like a brother; the sight of him gives me joy; I divide my dinner with him and at dessert what do I discover? That I have given food to the candidate of the opposition?"

"Opposition is a word from your mouth

which astonishes me. If it is to raise up the empire in the person of Loidreau that you have come to Montescourt, allow me to say that I prefer Lasserre."

"So, this is what we have come to! Listen, if the point at stake was to open my purse or risk my life at the sword's point for you, I am your man, but to nominate you here, Ah! no. If you wish a seat, present yourself at the box office of any theatre, there you are well known at least."

"You forget that we have lived at Barjols for five centuries."

"If you speak of the family vaults and their inhabitants, I have nothing to say. But, of yourself, it is another thing."

"Nonsense! You have seen Loidreau."

"Certainly, I have seen him; I do not say to you that he is a great man or that he can boast of his ancestors for five hundred years back, but he knows all his electors by name, all the chances are for him, at least that is the order."

Raoul arose with rather a forced smile, "That will do," said he; "be so kind as to order my carriage for me, also I thank you for

your frankness. I shall write the duke of our conversation, and between us, I have reason to believe it will surprise him."

The two friends separated with a cold shake of the hand.

"There was nothing left but to quarrel with this one," thought Gaston; "why did I come to this wretched place?"

The next day the *Democrat*, always well informed, published the following article:

"It has been some time since one has seen so many coronets at the sous-préfecture. Yesterday evening M. le Marquis dined with M. le Count. At dessert, the noble lords drank to the health of the king, with closed doors. We think we know that they also drank to the success of the coming elections. Perhaps the head of the house (par-interim), at Fresnau, will do well not to take the toasts to himself; we may depend upon some surprises, not far distant, on the electoral field."

CHAPTER VII.

Two days after, Loidreau walked into Reygnac's office and seated himself in the best arm chair, with the satisfied air of a man who returns home after a long absence.

"My dear sous-préfet," said he, "I put my foot in this place for the first time in seven years, but I will atone for that lost time now that we have an official that one can visit. We must see each other as much as possible. I warn you that you have made a conquest of the ladies. Also they have charged me with a formal invitation for you, to dine with us next Sunday evening. We shall have some people there I shall be happy to present to you."

"Good!" thought Reygnac, "the article in the *Democrat* has struck the right chord. All the district will be there."

"We have reached the moment," recited the candidate, "when the union of all the

candidates becomes necessary. The Marshal is offered to them as a central point to rally, but in this district it is to you, Monsieur le Sous-Préfet, to whom it belongs, to gather them about your person. It is necessary, permit me to say, that there should be no hesitation nor equivocation."

"Monsieur," said Reygnac, "I should be much surprised if myself or my acts were regarded as suspicious. Please give me an example of entire frankness. My intimacy with the Marquis de Barjols has caused you some uneasiness."

"Let us look at it; in itself not in the least; I know your opinions, but you have under your eyes illustrious examples of patriotic self-denial, only, it is not necessary to use against us your personal friends. If the royalist committee obstinately maintain the candidature of the marquis, I shall lose four or five thousand votes in the minimum; now without these votes I can very easily be beaten, monsieur."

"You look at the thing at its worst, Monsieur le Deputy."

"No, believe me, I know my business; I

speak coolly, for I assure you that politics do not move me in the least."

"Nonsense," said Gaston, "I, whom you reckon amongst the convinced!"

Loidreau drew his chair nearer to Gaston and lowered his voice: "Monsieur de Reygnac, you are a gentleman and one can open his heart to you in all confidence; I know universal suffrage and I know what one must expect from it. If I am re-elected in October, do you know what will be my first care?"

"Mon Dieu, no!"

"It will be to try to be nominated General Treasurer; then, at least, I shall hold something."

"But Fresnau, your nephew, your niece?"

"My niece is twenty years old, monsieur, and some day she will end by accepting a husband, above all if I urge it; something I have not wished until now. Suppose that her husband should be an intelligent and honorable man, knowing the district and becoming known here. There would be then a successor found for my deputy's seat and a guardian for the little boy Félix; I leave him at Fresnau with his wife, his electors, and his brother-in-law;

I spend my days in my receivership, and I am willing to be hung if I am ever caught talking, or acting politics. But it will be necessary, before all, that I be renominated in October."

Loidreau took out his watch and arose. He had said all he wished to say.

"Au revoir, my dear sous-préfet; I forgot myself chatting with you. Sunday evening, we shall see you."

"My faith!" thought Gaston when alone, "Madame du Villars has prophesied truly and Loidreau comes to offer me his niece's hand, on condition that I will refuse my aid to candidate Barjols. Decidedly the situation assumes an interesting phase."

That evening he wrote to his mother, "I have made, it seems to me, a conquest of a beautiful girl who has five or six millions dowry. She has a brother who is three years old; a mother who is insane, and an uncle who is candidate in the elections, who has his reasons for wishing to please me. Unfortunately, the father of this young girl was a mason, but he had the good taste not to always work for others; I recommend to you a certain hotel built by him on Avenue de Messine, a hand-

some one, by my faith! and which his son-in-law will occupy. Meanwhile, to be frank, I ought to tell you that it will be too early to begin preparations for the wedding, for I anticipated a little in speaking to you of the conquest, for truly I have only conquered the uncle. As to the niece, I have seen her only once and she hardly looked at me. So, do not take this pleasantry as serious. Meanwhile, I am always the same impractical man that you have reproached me with being; if ever I do marry, it will not be after this fashion."

The following Sunday, about thirty people were gathered around a glittering table in the dining room at Fresnau; one met there somewhat of a mixture; some of the principal office holders of Montescourt; some rich citizens of the neighborhood; others that were not; a Parisian journalist engaged for the elections; the curé of the parish, and of course, Gaston de Reygnac, the curiosity, if not the hero of the party.

Loidreau thought to make a master stroke in inviting the Marquis de Barjols, but Raoul had a pretext of hindrance, and Loidreau, who

liked much what is called "to take action" of the proceeding, had the place of the stubborn guest left empty, to show all from which side came the first slight.

As to the most distinguished person at this reunion, Reygnac, he had received from the beautiful heiress a visibly cold welcome.

"What whim has seized her?" he asked himself; "does she accuse me, like the *Democrat*, of having embraced the cause of the factious Raoul? Or perchance she may have heard of the good intention of her uncle as to herself and me; in that case I cannot say that she encourages them. It will be necessary to get out of the affair at once. Does she take me for a vulgar fortune hunter? Bless my heart! My beauty, you deceive yourself, and I shall take care to let you see it."

Meanwhile the dinner progressed slowly to its end. All knew that the orders were not to talk politics, but it was lost time; one could see it was in their minds; what harm to speak of it? Accordingly as their heads became excited, allusions were easily dropped, like the cannons of a ship, lighted by an incendiary. At first Loidreau did his best to restrain them,

but after the first glass of champagne, he admitted himself vanquished and bowed his head to the toasts. They commenced to drink to his success, without comment. Then the orators made desperate attempts, and what attempts!

The echoes of history ranged from St. Helena to Chiselhurst. The master of the house, who was, after all, a man of certain shrewdness, closed the séance by a last toast.

"I drink," said he, "to the young magistrate, whose presence in the midst of us is sufficient to merit our confidence in the government, which has shown such good sense in the choice."

In the midst of thunders of applause Reynac bowed, his hand placed over his heart. In accepting this toast as he had the others, he tacitly bound himself to support them. At the same time he looked at Henriette, as much as to say: Am I compromised enough now? Do you think still that I would cause any trouble for this good man who is your uncle?

But his look met two eyes full of defiance, and while they all were touching glasses Mlle. Loidreau left hers scornfully upon the table.



"And while they were all touching glasses, Mlle. Loidreau left hers upon the table."

It was almost a scandal; the guests looked at each other. Fortunately it was time to leave the table.

After the coffee was served in the parlor, the young girl seated herself at the piano, at her uncle's request, and played with a true talent a grande valse of Chopin's. The guests applauded with frenzy; only the journalist seated under a lamp in full light did not stir, but when the eyes of all were turned toward this refractory auditor, they saw that he had tears in his eyes; then silence reigned, and one felt something like respect for him. Each one knew that this talented man's silent tears went far ahead of all their applause.

"Ah! Monsieur le Sous-Prefet," asked Loidreau for want of something to say, "what do you think of my niece's playing? Plante said that she was his best pupil."

Reygnac made a gesture as if regretting that he must reply. "Mon Dieu! Mademoiselle possesses a remarkable talent, but I never could understand why French people are so wild over Chopin's music. They lack one indispensable quality to render it well, that is they should be Poles."

Everybody was surprised at Gaston's severity. It was generally considered bad taste; Perrin seemed to feel highly indignant. The journalist was vexed that another should produce more of a sensation than he had.

Henriette turned her face to the people and looked more surprised than displeased; she looked at Gaston with a haughty half-smile, which well became her proud beauty.

Suddenly, Gaston, who had not taken his eyes off from her, admiring her, spite of all, saw her change countenance and take on an indefinable expression where terror seemed to predominate. The door had just opened and "Monsieur Felix" made his entrance into the room, which belonged to him, and among the guests, to whom, without knowing it, he had just given a dinner worthy a congress of diplomats.

Beautiful as an Italian Cupid, with his black eyes and curling blonde hair, the child, seated upon his aunt's knee, looked curiously at all these strange faces stooping before him.

When he saw his sister seated upon the music stool outside the circle, he held out his little arms, and the young girl as if conquered by this gesture, sprang forward and took him

in her arms. She kept him only long enough to give him a kiss, fierce with passionate energy, then she gave him to her aunt, and returned to the piano, which she made ring with the famous march, which Berlioz interpolated into his "Damnation of Faust."

"Strange girl," thought Gaston, who had not lost one of her movements. "Is she angry with this little fellow because he must have half her fortune? Or is it her way of loving people? One thing is sure! that is, we must have a little reckoning together, and the sooner the better."

A quarter of an hour later, all the guests were promenading in the park, where the fine moon was shedding her silvery light. As it is the fashion in the country, the men, with lighted cigars, surrounded the master of the house, while the ladies kept apart under charge of Madame Loidreau.

Little by little a white shadow strayed away from the group. It was Henriette; she walked with bent head, at equal distances from the men—dashing at full speed into politics, and the women busy talking of servants. Suddenly a step behind her broke her reverie.

"Mademoiselle," said Reygnac, approaching her in a nervous manner, "will you allow me to respectfully ask you a question?"

Henriette, at first astonished, looked at her questioner, who had a respectful air, it is true, although it did not detract from his dignified bearing. Mlle. Loidreau herself was impressed by it; no man she had known had been so near intimidating her. Taking the young girl's silence for consent, Gaston continued.

"Do you know what true hospitality is, mademoiselle? It is a kind of religion, which makes even an enemy sacred to those who receive them under their roof; I am in your house, and I am not your enemy. Why have I received from you just now an insult which would be sufficient between men, to make them fight?"

"You are not in my house," said Henriette, "you are my uncle's guest. His election interests him, and he considers it before everything else; that is all right. The means which he uses to succeed are his affairs. It may be that he gives dinners, makes promises, and perhaps contracts engagements. But there are

some things that he cannot do; that is, monsieur, what I wish to make you understand; I have my reasons for it."

The coolness of this strange person exasperated him more than the insult she had given him at the table. Of what reasons could she be speaking? Did she know by chance of Loidreau's visit to the sous-prefecture and the oratorical display which he indulged in? Did she suppose that he, Reygnac, had listened to it? This idea made him start.

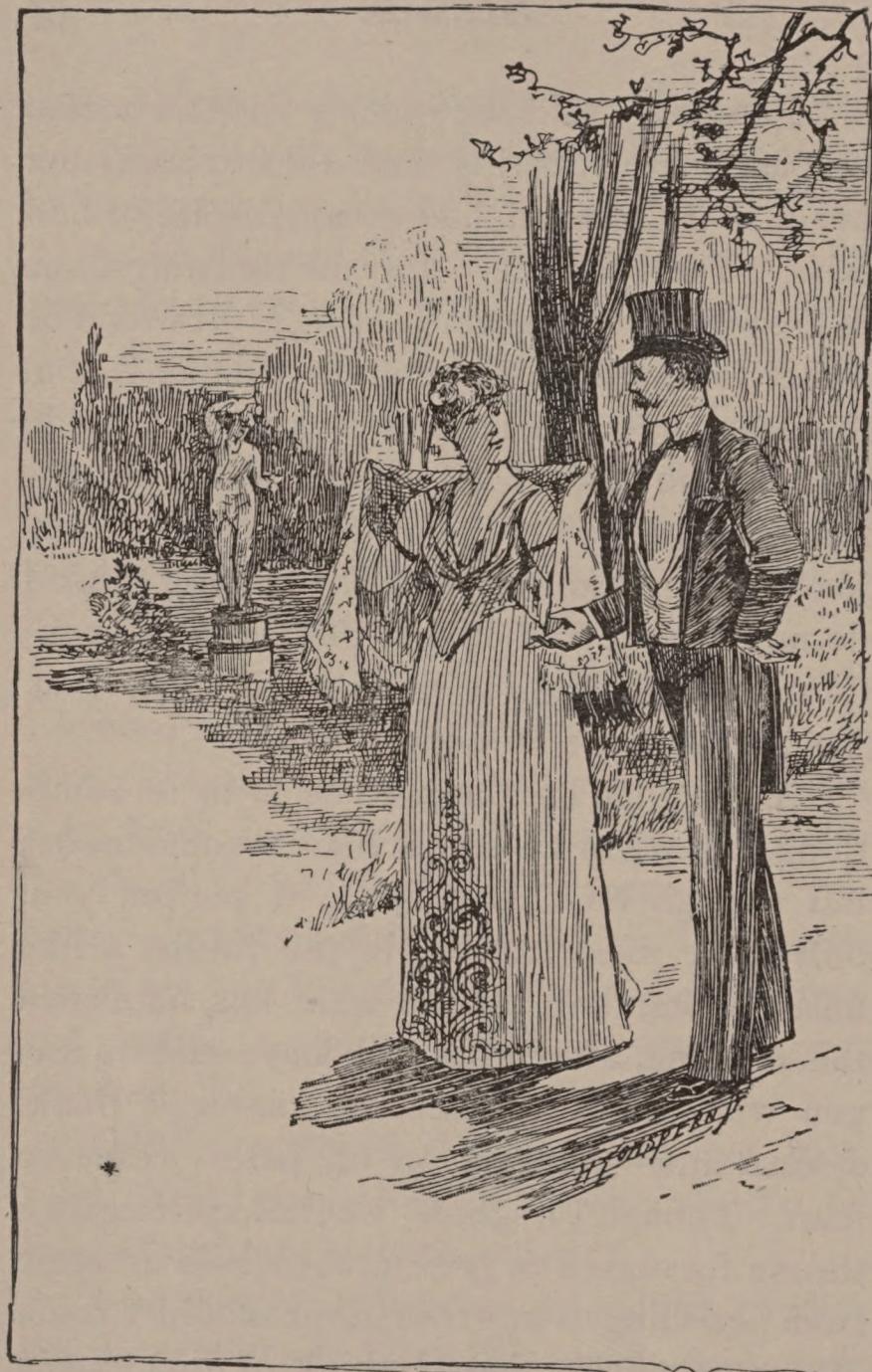
"I see," said he, "that it pleases you to give a lesson, but to whom! To your uncle or to me? If it is your uncle, was it necessary that your hand, in order to hit him, should graze the cheek of an honest gentleman? If you believe, mademoiselle, that being all that you are, gives you the right to lay aside courtesy and justice, my pity for you surpasses my resentment."

"Oh!" muttered she stamping her foot, "the cursed fate of being a woman! To be obliged to listen to such words!"

"Just now you obliged me to submit to what was more difficult, for thirty people had their eyes upon me."

“Pardon!” said she quickly with an accent of passionate suffering, and turning away her head, as if the word had escaped spite of herself. “Yes! pity me. Pity me for being alone in the world. What am I saying? It would be better for me to be alone and not dependent in the least upon an ambitious man who would give me, no matter to whom; would let me fall no matter where, in order to secure a majority of one thousand votes. Do you think I do not suspect that he has offered me to you; do not reply; he has done worse than that. You, at least are an honest man.”

“A Reygnac has the pretension to be something more than an honest man, mademoiselle; but enough on this subject; I pardon you, only there must not be, in the future, a like misunderstanding. After what has happened this evening, after what you have said to me, you will find a sufficient guarantee, I think, against all—illusion on my part. Haye no fear. Though I might for a certain price gain a throne for myself or prevent the whole universe from perishing to-morrow, never should I think of you otherwise than I think of that statue there. This I swear to you, upon my honor.”



"Never should I think of you otherwise than I think of that statue there."

He spoke in a tone of voice that the remains of anger made a little vibrating; but he was one of those who could not keep for any length of time malice against a woman, especially one as beautiful as Henriette, and she was superlatively so, at this time. The emotions which had dominated, gave to her mysteriously lighted-up face no end of fascinations. Added to this picture, a frame made to take the spite out of the most vindictive, the delicious freshness of the night, the air sweetly perfumed by the neighboring flowers, the sombre thickness of the mass of green foliage shielded the solitude of the tête-à-tête, and, as if to show them how little they appreciated it, twenty steps from them the sweet voice of a nightingale sang the song of eternal love, in his happy carelessness.

Henriette at this moment would have had only one word to say to make Gaston feel that he had sworn a little too quickly, and to carry away from him more than a pardon; but without doubt the pardon was sufficient for her. She made neither gesture nor sound, and drawing over her half-naked shoulders a white-lace scarf, she plunged into a narrow

foot-path, leaving her companion displeased with her, but still more astonished at himself. During this time, in the midst of the circle of white shirt fronts that good digestion had softened, Loidreau, convinced of his own admiration, repeated the famous phrase, "We have reached the moment when the union of the conservatives becomes necessary." From the feminine group, the tart voice of Mme. Loidreau penetrated in her turn, "I get my meats from Paris during the winter, but in summer it will be impossible on account of the heat."

CHAPTER VIII.

IT is not everybody who has had the opportunity, in his life, to say to a beautiful girl, walking with her in the moonlight: "You are adorable, you are twenty years old, and have five millions dowry, your guardian needs me and will favor my suit, but to prevent the world from coming to an end, I would not marry you."

Whilst driving back to Montescourt, Reynac could relish at his leisure the satisfaction of having done this rare thing; he felt a certain pride in himself. He had had the best of it, so it seemed to him, and meanwhile, he saw everything rose colored, like a man who has been drinking some real champagne. If he drank Saumur at two francs a bottle he would have had neuralgia, and found that he had been too hasty. Our judgment hangs on so little a thing!

"This is the way," said he, "it is necessary

to treat the daughters of these commoners. They bribe us well with their millions! Could we not earn the millions without them? Without us, they could never be anything but Lo-dreaus."

Meanwhile, wishing to be just toward each, in spite of his advantages, he continued: "This girl is pretty after all. She is even very beautiful; such eyes as hers make one do silly things, and she has an astonishing *chic* for a girl who is not of noble birth. She would have a distinguished look, seated in a phaeton at the left of a husband like me. Only we should be obliged to have for the phaeton some matchless horses. I see from here, the hotel in the Boulevard Haussmann. As to location, I know of none more convenient. One can reach the Bois in ten minutes, the theatre in five——"

Launched upon so good a road, Gaston was not for stopping short. He entered the theatre, chose the best box, which he hired for three years. Then he returned to the Boulevard Haussmann, where, unfortunately, the stables were a little small, but he consoled himself in reflecting that it was more practical to have

his carriages and horses in an out-house, built expressly with a yard for work and washing. He made the plans in his head, and was annoyed to find that he could not do it with much less than half a million. It was foolish, but he probably would have done it, if the carriage, in making a fearful uproar passing over the first pavements of Montescourt, had not aroused him and recalled him to more practical ideas.

He entered his house, walked into his office, and found upon his desk his first month's salary.

"*Ma foi!*" thought he, "here is the first money I ever earned in my life, for I have always lost at cards. Three hundred and sixty-five francs. Bless me! it is a sum; all the same, I must wait before I build my stables."

The next day, after he had been working for two hours making out the list of the new corporations, a card was brought him upon which was written, "The Mayor of Barjols and his assistant."

"Tell them to come in," said Reygnac, writing the last line on the page. The unexpected sound which he heard behind him, of little

heels and rustling of skirts, made him turn his head. A blonde young lady, small, without being thin, entered his office, looking a little embarrassed, but on the whole, she had an amused and curious look. Her attire was simple, but not like anybody else's. Her cambric dress, at two francs a yard, had been made at Paris. The large straw hat, trimmed with a knot of red ribbon, would have made the stylish milliner at Montescourt smile. Added to that, a substantial écrù umbrella, gloves that were not quite new, and shoes with heavy soles; behind, Raoul's cheerful face appeared. You will suspect at once, as Reygnac did, the name of this young lady who ventured thus into the sous-préfecture of Montescourt.

Reygnac, much surprised, arose precipitately, buttoned his loose jacket, re-adjusted his neck tie, and hastened to offer her a seat without stopping to shake hands with the marquis.

“Mon Dieu! Mademoiselle, why did they not take you into the drawing-room?”

“Into the drawing-room!” said Raoul gayly; “would you believe that this respectable young lady has come to pay a visit to a young bache-

lor; above all one that is sous-préfet of the Republic? We have public business and are here to transact it. I present to you my assistant, or if you like it better, my director of public charities, otherwise called my sister."

"Mademoiselle," said Gaston bowing, "I know of many large cities where it is not done as well as at Barjols."

"Come," interrupted Raoul, "no flattery in the exercise of your duties. You, Sabine, explain what you wish."

"Monsieur" — commenced the young girl.

"People say, 'monsieur le sous-préfet,'" corrected the marquis.

"We have come about a lottery," said Sabine, shrugging her pretty shoulders, and looking at her brother.

Gaston put his hand into his pocket. "Give me some tickets, mademoiselle; twenty-five, a hundred, what you will. It has been more than a month since a person has begged of me, and I assure you I have missed it."

"Just see," interrupted Raoul gesticulating, "by what ignoramuses we are governed to-day!"

I advise you to explain, my dear, to this magistrate, his duties."

"Monsieur," continued Sabine who seemed very much amused, "before organizing this lottery for the poor people of Barjols, I need your license; without it, I should be prosecuted."

"Prosecuted! My license! But, mademoiselle, to whom then do you think you are speaking? Go; organize your lotteries and never stop them, if you find the system lucrative. After all, I believe you will not be the first, and you would be very wrong to trouble yourself. So take your freedom. You have all the license that one can give or receive in this world."

"It is"—said Sabine hesitating a little.

"My sister is like the Normans. She wants a little piece of writing. She is cautious, since she was near being imprisoned last year for devoting herself to a lottery that was not authorized. Your predecessor was less gallant than you, and at the present time none of you fellows are long lived."

Gaston rang the bell; the clerk appeared.

"Quick, Monsieur Léfèvre, a decree approving a lottery for Mademoiselle de Barjols."

From behind his gold glasses Léfèvre gave his chief a singular look. It was thus that Sully must have stared at Henry IV. the day when that monarch wrote out one of those promises of marriage, which he indulged himself in signing, which was as easy to get out of as a lottery.

"Mademoiselle is of age?" asked the secretary, as if he had put an ordinary question.

"I am twenty-three years old," Sabine heroically answered, and raising her eyes to the ceiling, she added with a very amusing air of self-sacrifice, "it is for the poor!"

Léfèvre asked other questions less embarrassing. As Sabine answered, he took notes. At the end he asked:

"Have you written out a petition on stamped paper? Have you the mayor's authorization?"

"That is useless," said Raoul, "since my sister applies in person, and the mayor accompanies her."

But Léfèvre would listen to nothing, and strictly confined himself to the formal rules; so well, that the marquis complied and gave his signature.

Sabine took twelve sous out of her pocket

to pay for the license, and the clerk left, promising it should be ready in an hour.

“Eh! bien,” said Gaston, “if mademoiselle will permit me, I will become a gentleman of leisure for an hour and do the honors of my park.”

The park was soon visited. It consisted of a garden planted with beautiful trees, under which a consumptive turf was drying; it terminated with a terrace from which one had a pretty view of the country.

They seated themselves in the shade, around a rusty iron table, which was soon concealed with plates of cake and wine glasses; Reynac gave himself the long-forgotten pleasure of ordering luncheon for a pretty girl. Until now he had hardly looked at his visitor, not that he lowered his eyes from habit in the presence of ladies, but because he liked to do agreeable things at his leisure, and conscientiously. In raising her veil, after removing her gloves from her hands, Mademoiselle de Barjols exposed a very pretty white hand—a little plump, but very appetizing—and some large beautiful blue eyes, which seemed to say, “we are gentle and inoffensive because it

pleases us so to be, but still it would not do to rely on it."

Her teeth were the most beautiful ever seen, although, to conceal nothing, she had two lower ones which, finding the casket too small, were very drolly perched over the others.

As to what the lady thought, I cannot say, but Gaston, before the first cake disappeared, vowed to himself, that nothing was so stupid as a too-regular set of teeth. Sabine was one of those fortunate mortals who was pleasing. Whatever she did, whatever she wore, and if need be, whatever she lacked, I think it would be called in good French, "*Avoir le charme.*"

Joined to this fairy's gift, was an air of health and good spirits, a little sentiment concealed under a mocking air, and finally the distinction of a noble ancestry. You can understand that Gaston, who was a good judge of ladies, spared no pains for this one. When I say that he was a good judge of ladies, I am only half telling the truth. He had seen many, and intimately, but all the specimens that passed before his eyes were hot-house plants, some very valuable, others the contrary. They all lacked simplicity, which is the key note of

education. A young man who leads a jolly life, whose mother does not entertain, who frequents exclusively—in matters of society—those houses where one can amuse one's self, can reach the age of forty years without having met a Sabine de Barjols, and when he does meet one, after seven or eight years of flirtation, of all kinds of love save the platonic, of intrigues where nothing was wanted except esteem, he opens his eyes like a miner at Newcastle, who finds in the coal dust of his drift an ermine with fur as white as snow.

"So, mademoiselle," said Gaston, "it is you who take the mayor's place when he is absent?"

"It is true, my days are not long enough, and I often wonder what the ministers do."

"There are a dozen of them and only one of you."

"Yes, but they have not a mother to take care of, and they do not play the organ in church," added Raoul, "nor make poultices for the sick, nor clothes for the poor——"

"And they have no poultry yard," interrupted Sabine hurriedly.

"There, mademoiselle, is where you are

mistaken, let me tell you; but they have no need to trouble themselves, their fowls come to eat from their hands; and your parish, how does it get on?"

"Not so bad, sometimes the firemen give some annoyance."

"Tell me about it. Can I help you?"

"Perhaps, we are talking of establishing a company, for we often have fires. The committee have voted for some uniforms, but they refuse to vote for the engine."

"Behold some clever men! and what says Monsieur le Maire?"

Mlle. Barjols raised two supplicating eyes to Gaston's face. "My brother says, if the administration would help us—the district is not rich, and nothing has been done for us for a long time. This M. Lasserre always refused to take any notice of us on account of my brother's political ideas, which are—"

"Deplorable," added Gaston a little amused and a little vexed to see this young aristocrat using all the precaution in speaking to him that she would have taken with a vagabond.

"Very well, mademoiselle, you shall have your fire engine, I promise it."

"How these poor people will bless you."

"You are the one they will bless; but I suspect that is their custom; in truth I was ignorant until to-day, of what the life of a young girl like you might be, busying yourself with serious things, living for others and completely happy, into the bargain, for I see that you are."

"I am, thanks to you, monsieur, I have had a good day. With all my heart, I thank you."

At this moment Léfèvre re-appeared with a paper, majestically filled with "whereas" and "considering." It laid stress among other motives upon the recipient's "good life and morals," which made Gaston shrug his shoulders while listening to the reading given by Léfèvre.

Very solemnly he pushed away the plates of cake, took the pen which Léfèvre handed him, and made his signature.

"I hope," said he, putting the paper into the pretty hand extended for it, "that you will have some other favors to ask."

"I have one more," replied Sabine blushing a little, "but this one is on my mother's part; it is to come soon to see her at Barjols. Now I must arouse my brother."

"Raoul!"

"What do you want?" said the marquis moving in his chair.

"Your assistant wishes to go," said Reygnac; "have you been asleep? Is



this the way you busy yourself with official matters?"

"It was warm and you were talking—Has my sister got her engine?"

" You listened to us then? "

" No, but it was a serious matter; the lottery was only a pretext; with women, it is always the postscript which is the principal thing; she is like them all."

" I do not think so," murmured Gaston, watching Mademoiselle de Barjols, who was putting the paper into her pocket.

When his guests had departed, he felt seized with a prodigious *ennui*. He did not wish to return to his papers, nor to read his journal, to see anybody or to be alone, to go out or to stay at home. In thinking it over, he discovered that he wished for only one thing; it was, to be seated in the carriage which bore Sabine away.

CHAPTER IX.

THE next morning, the Countess de Reygnac telegraphed her son, "I shall be with you this evening." Gaston had a room prepared for his mother, as well as he could, and at the appointed time he was at the station to meet her. She descended from a second-class compartment. She was a small person, with a worn-out looking face; her dress was like her face, but her eyes sparkled with intelligence, and the strong lines about her mouth denoted an iron will. She might be good-natured, but nothing could make one believe it was her dominating quality; neither the good qualities nor faults were to be read at first sight upon this cold, stony face, over which she had perfect control.

"What a pleasant surprise!" exclaimed her son, embracing her with more of respect than tenderness. "I did not expect you for a month. What has so agreeably changed your plans?"

"Your last letter and the reflections that it suggested to me. We will talk of it seriously to-morrow, when I shall have slept. These cars exhaust one, but there was no second-class compartment on the express."

"Ah, mother, for so little economy!"

"My poor boy," said the countess with a sigh, "you know very well that we are reduced to small economies."

The Countess de Reygnac, dowager of not so high birth as her husband (for she was really and truly only a daughter of tradespeople), but much richer, had overcome, to marry him, the resistance of all her friends. She was twenty then; she loved, and love is blind or at least near-sighted, which makes mistakes easier.

At the end of six months the young countess did not need glasses to see that she had deceived herself, as well as that she was being deceived. The saddest thing was, that she was deceived at her own expense. Then she commenced to struggle, less for herself than her son, who was born soon after. Never—the truth must be told—was a more courteous struggle seen.

Gaston's father was a gentleman to the tips of his fingers, and I do not think it was possible that one could ruin his wife in a more polite fashion. M. de Reygnac reduced her to the last stages of poverty with such charming attentions, that she often asked herself if this misery was not Heaven.

But a cold taken, God only knows when or how; happily brought to an end this courtesy, by putting the count in the cemetery.

His widow buried him civilly, but her courtesy did not carry her to the point of tears; she was one of those who bear certain troubles without complaint, when they have only themselves to blame, but to console themselves, they never forgive.

Madame de Reygnac had twenty-eight years of comparative tranquillity, but not of rest. On one side, she had to dispute the remainder of her fortune with money lenders, whom she forced to commend her management; on the other side, she had to educate her son, whom she had made, trait for trait, upon the model of her husband, honest woman that she was.

Meanwhile, when Gaston reached his majority, his mother had been able, by dint of great

pains, to save up for him a small patrimony. It was a bright-colored future, and the countess almost believed herself a quarter of a century younger, when she saw again in her son the ways of her dead husband, the same careless elegance, the same winning charms, the same way of concealing a prank under a kiss, as a poor comedienne conceals a hole in her dress under a bunch of roses.

At first Madame de Reygnac was discouraged, and being not so young as the first time, bent her head and resigned herself to it; but when she realized what he had at stake, she roused herself from this beautiful resignation, and without saying one angry word, she gave her son some judicious advice, which might have been of service to Don Juan in person. They were no less good friends for that, but in their present situation, this judicious counsel was a simple luxury to Gaston. They lived as in the past, save that they went to live in the fifth story, back. To those who tried to pity them, the countess would say, "My son has landed his boat too quickly, but what can you expect? One must forgive the follies of youth; underneath all, he has a heart of gold."

It is certain, that whether her son's heart was made of gold or silver, it was all that she had to offer in exchange for the fortune that she was looking for. The fortunes were not wanting! but by a rigorous law of nature the fortunes were invariably fastened to an heiress like a pearl to a shell (the comparison was Gaston's).

"A marriage for money?" said he, "much obliged. If the heiress is ugly, then I prefer the relief committee, or should she be pretty, in that case, she would know sooner or later why I took her; I have settled in advance upon the kind which I wait for."

After several attempts, Madame de Reynac realized that the prodigal son was not yet ready for the fatted calf; and that instead of a dowry, she must look for a position for him. A difficult undertaking!

Gaston wanted nothing better. He was not wanting in intelligence or education; he also had some seriousness, an easy thing to understand, since he had used so little of it until now! But at this time counts were not in demand, at least for the lucrative offices, for the Republic gave them willingly to the others, and

this young gentleman had not the means to serve his country for glory.

At last came the 16th of May, and thanks to the overtures of the countess—who carried maternal love almost to the verge of intrigue, so people said—the ancient line of Reygnac added for the first time a sous-préfet among its descendants. Such is the abridged history of the countess.

After a good night's rest, the mother and son met again, at the breakfast table. The countess, delighted at seeing her dear Gaston, had an animation and gayety quite unknown to her. When they were alone she leaned upon the arm of her chair and said, looking at her auditor through her tortoise-shell lorgnettes, “My dear boy, do you fancy that I have come here only to see your beautiful eyes? Do you know what brought me? I came to make you marry Henriette Loidreau.”

“Upon my word, my dear mamma, you are a little too fast; I told her only three days ago, that she was precisely the only woman whom I never would marry.”

All the excitement which had shone in the countess's face was suddenly extinguished.

"What have you done?" groaned she.
"What caused you to quarrel with this young lady?"

"We have not quarrelled. We are the best friends in the world; but *Diable!* to marry her? I would sooner become a Turk!"

"Since when has she displeased you so much?"

"Since a certain evening when she failed to be agreeable. Do not speak to me of these beautiful creatures made of money. One cannot look at them, even to admire, but what they imagine one wishes their money. A kind of warehouse where one cannot wander from stall to stall without a monsieur in white cravat walks behind you, his eyes upon your hands."

"Be still, all this is ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous! It was when this saucy baggage looked at me from the height of her grandeur. I made her come down from it, and I assure you, it did not take long."

"You have hastened matters!"

"Was it necessary to wait until she sent me a summons from an officer to think no more of her?"

"Would to God that the officers never sum-

moned you for anything worse! In your place I know very well what I should think."

"And what would you think, if you please?"

"That a bird who cries so loud has fear that she will be caged."

"What then?"

"If I had a mother with so much intelligence, I would give her *carte blanche*, and never molest her in any way."

"You have not reflected upon all that would be said, if you succeeded, which will not happen, nevertheless."

"Electoral corruption; an officer selling his vote to a candidate; a gentleman selling his name; God knows what the papers would not discover about it!"

"Yes, but I know that we could manage all that!"

"Then, mother, this is the way we are situated! This young lady has taken a dislike to me; I do not like her; you would make us perfectly miserable."

"But this is not the question; she is rich."

"Over the escutcheon of a mason!"

"I did not know that you were so chivalrous, my son."

"Ma foi, neither did I, I admit it, but I am, and it gives me pleasure. There is something good in me!"

Madame de Reygnac got up and stood by the window watching the few people who passed by the sous-préfecture. Suddenly, after a silence, she turned and came straight to her son and said; "Ah! you gentleman, you can be chivalrous when it is agreeable to you; one sees you time after time put on your grand airs in face of these plebeian heiresses before marriage, but, when once married, when you have become resigned to the misalliance, your fine scruples vanish. I know something about it. You understand me, do you not? I am fifty years old and I live in the fifth story; my legs are tired out with running to money lenders and business men, now that I have to walk.

"What did I gain by marrying into high rank? I see nobody, save some courageous friends, from whom at New Years I receive some useful gifts. Meanwhile, have you ever heard me utter a complaint about the past? That does not prevent its being hard to grow old in a

garret, and you will be glad to know, if you please, that I admire, least of all, the noble



pride which keeps you from making me come down. It would have been better if you had prevented my going up. You very chivalrous gentleman!"

"Say no more," said Reygnac rising in his turn, pale as a ghost. "I have believed until now that you had forgiven my father and me; but since it is not so, since you are my mother, a most patient creditor, but more severe than others, do as you please. Only understand the situation. It is necessary after what has passed that the offer should come from the young lady's side, and I foresee several difficulties. As to myself, I will not make a move, but the day when you want my signature to the marriage contract, I am ready. If ever your daughter-in-law complains to you that I do not love her, that I neglect her, deceive her or dissipate her fortune, you will know how to reply to her."

He spoke in a trembling voice, and his eyes shone with a moist lustre. Bowing respectfully to his mother, he left the room.

"If I am not very much mistaken, thought the countess," whose penetration was not of the common order, "Monsieur Gaston has something else to sacrifice besides his scruples; but we have nothing to do with sentiment, neither of us."

CHAPTER X.

THE next day Reygnac went to Fresnau, to pay a visit, and, as one may suppose, his mother did not let him go alone.

For the occasion, she found in the bottom of her trunk a black satin dress, nearly new, which gave her a grand look, so much so that Madame Loidreau commenced to talk to her in the third person, as she used to do to the proprietors of the farm where she spent her youth.

Henriette turned pale, but just at this moment Madame de Reygnac won her by a look, which seemed to say, No matter! ladies, like you and I, laugh at these things; one sees misalliances in the best families.

After a quarter of an hour's conversation in the house, the countess understood by Loidreau's uneasiness that it was time to ask to visit the park. They started out in two parties, the first composed of Loidreau and his wife with their noble guest, the second of Gaston

and Henriette. At the end of a hundred steps or more the countess turned to admire the front.

“Superb!” exclaimed she, “and how well the lawn is kept! It calls to mind, with a little less extent, the garden of the Elysée.”

“Have you been there, madame?” questioned Loidreau, whom these words made prick up his ears.

“I?” replied the countess with a slight smile, “I go there often, there is nothing that I like better in the world; I have known the marshal since the time when we studied our catechism together.”

“The devil!” said the candidate, forgetting himself, “how then does it happen that your son has only a third-class position?”

Madame de Reygnac had a discreet little cough.

“Ah! Monsieur le Deputy, the district of Montescourt will produce a representative just as grand as any other; but you are not ignorant, I think, of how much a division of the conservative party——To be brief, they needed a sure man, and my son has devoted himself.”

“Then,” said Loidreau, who knew where

the shoe pinched, "they think of another conservative candidate at Paris? The Marquis de Barjols—is it not?"

"Pooh!" said the countess, "we will talk again about it," with an air that persuaded the worthy man that she had made her trip to Montescourt for no other purpose.

"Do you know, dear Madame Loidreau, what interested me the most when I lived in the country? it was my poultry yard."

During this time Henriette was saying to Gaston, "It seems you received a lovely visit day before yesterday."

"A lovely visit? Ah! Yes, Mademoiselle de Barjols. You know it already?"

"Does not one know everything in the country, principally at election time? How did you like Sabine?"

"Oh! O mademoiselle! Do you take me for a novice? How foolish! It was long ago that I learned never to reply to a woman when she asks me how old I think she is, or what I think of another woman!"

"Very good! you know what is proper. I am not a woman for you. Let me be your comrade."

"I read a fable recently where there was a question similar to that; but one saw by it that a wolf who became a shepherd, is always a wolf."

"It is my opinion, if all the sheep were like you, the wolves would have scanty living. Come now, admit that Sabine is charming."

"Not at all; she is disagreeable, tiresome, ugly, and blonde into the bargain, I cannot endure blondes."

"So be it. I am sure that you are fascinated with my old playmate. As for me, she is my ideal and if I was not too proud to be envious——"

"Envious? You? My faith! I think on the contrary that few human creatures can look at you without envy."

Henriette stopped. The smile disappeared from her lips and in her eyes one could read bitter suffering.

"Monsieur de Reygnac," said she, "you think me very happy? Well, if God, supposing he exists, could perform a miracle for me, if I could become, to-morrow, not Sabine de Barjols, but that countrywoman pulling grass in the walks, while her child rolls on the turf, I

would thank him on my bended knees, until the last day of my life."

Gaston looked at this girl's impassioned and fatal face—who did not believe in God, and avowed it with a dark despair.

"You speak," murmured he lowering his voice, "as if you had committed some crime."

"I have not committed any crime, no more than Sabine de Barjols or that beggar, but they can be happy; I, never."

She stopped, with quick breath and tearful eyes. Gaston, a little embarrassed, said in a pleasant tone:

"I'll wager that you received from Paris this morning a box with one dress lacking, or that your uncle has tired you with his coming election."

She made a sign, "No," without speaking, while two large tears rolled down her cheeks. Then stamping her foot, as if irritated with herself, she said, continuing her walk:

"You have just seen what nobody has seen since my mother was taken away, but I have neither shame nor regret, for I know that you will become a true friend; I understood what kind of a man you were, the evening when you

told me that I played badly before everybody."

"It was not true, mademoiselle, only——"

"Only you felt the need of saying something disagreeable to me."

"Admit, that between us both, that evening, you were the first to be disagreeable."

"Let us not speak of that evening; we acted like two children, but it is ended, is it not. Now let us rejoin the others."

As to the others, they had fallen into the electoral, beaten path. "Rest easy, my dear deputy," said Gaston's mother, "we will carry your election with a high hand. You have the ladies on your side and when they will a thing ——Is it not so, Madame Loidreau?"

The good soul, who had never known what it was to have a will of her own, replied with a broad smile:

"Oh! certainly, madame la countess."

When Reygnac was once more on the road to Montescourt with his mother, he said:

"I hope very much you will not compromise us, here or elsewhere, to sustain the electoral campaign to the profit of this great man of the country. Rest certain that he will be

strong enough to get out of his difficulties alone."

"You know very well what enterprise I have undertaken; but let me tell you, this girl is superb, with her olive complexion, and large eyes, with dark circles underneath. Her uncle told me more than a dozen times, that she had five millions. Think of it! What a fortune!"

"Assuredly," said Gaston; "but if I could, for a tenth of that price, treat with a young girl of our own station, well brought up and who pleased me! There are some things about this girl that almost frighten me."

"You have become a coward! What could you do with a genteel young lady, having 25,000 pounds income, an enormous income for us? You would vegetate; you would be neither rich nor poor; you would have to take the bread from your own mouth to give me a living. No, my friend, no illusions. To be miserably poor at your age is possible, but at mine one gets tired of it. Do you wish me to begin anew my yesterday's sermon? What is said, is said, is it not?"

"Enough said!" sighed Gaston, accustomed to the maternal yoke; "but arrange it so that

they will ask my hand with all formality. All that I promise, is to be a good sort of a man and not to refuse to marry her, so as not to give pain to anybody."

"I do not ask more of you; oh! by the way, I have offered to take a certain step for Loisdreau; I wish to go to Barjols to-morrow, but I will go alone if you fear your presence will have a compromising look."

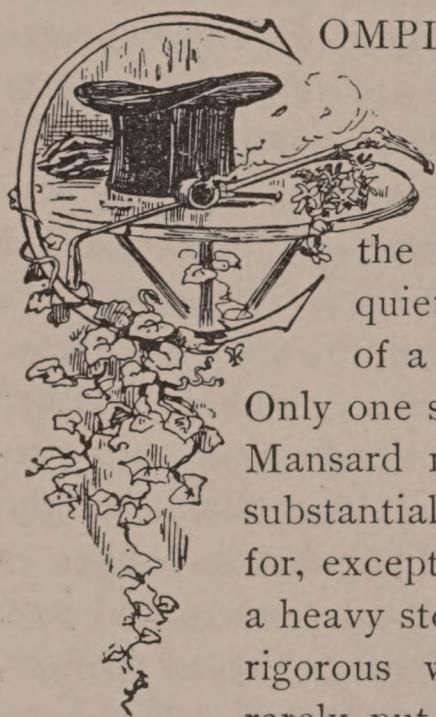
For more than one reason the young man wished to accompany his mother; on one account, the tendency which he saw in her for politics, caused him a little uneasiness; but another reason was he felt a morbid longing to see Sabine. Love! what foolishness! Simple curiosity to examine in cold blood, and listen with a calm ear to this charming girl, who, on the whole, had turned his head, with an inexplicable suddenness. Is she really so fascinating? Would her eyes, when seen the second time, have the same powerful attraction? Would her voice, heard again, seem so sweet? Such are the beautiful thoughts that one indulges in, when on the point of falling in love. "If you go alone to Barjols," said Gaston, "Raoul will think that I am vexed

with him. At his first visit we parted coldly on account of this same question of candidature. Between us, you have undertaken a mission——”

“Have you not read, that on the eve of an eclipse, Columbus was asked to give the moon to the savages? It is useless to add, that he managed it without compromising himself with the sun; I shall do as he did, and Loidreau will see his candidature shining anew in the starry heavens. Be tranquil; your mother is no fool.”

The next afternoon, Madame de Reygnac and her son saw the gates of the Chateau de Barjols open before them.

CHAPTER XI.



COMPLETELY demolished during the time of the religious wars, the old mansion was rebuilt on the ruins, under the more quiet and less imposing form of a Louis XIII. pavilion. Only one story, surmounted by a Mansard roof. They built in a substantial manner in those days, for, excepting the next day after a heavy storm or at the close of a rigorous winter, workmen had rarely put their feet inside this noble dwelling since they placed the last tile there, nearly two hundred and fifty years ago. The bricks of the walls had become dark, the framework of the windows and doors was grizzly, the roofs had become a dull shade, and the zinc of the ridge pieces shone no longer with

a metallic brilliancy. The massive oak blinds alone, carefully repainted, had the whiteness of linen compared with the whole, which was a little gloomy, but less so than one would imagine. A healthy and pleasant old age is never sad. In leaving the parish road, one crossed a small lawn, where set in grass were red patches of geraniums. Then came what was properly called the court, paved with stones from the neighboring stream, and bordered by large orange trees, the putting out of which about the 15th of April, and the taking in the 15th of October, were the two great events in the life of this quiet household. Other smaller plants, oleanders and myrtles, were arranged according to the old custom, upon the five steps of the semi-elliptical stairs leading to the door, in brown boxes or varnished jars. The vestibule with its lozenge-shaped marbles, covered with a rustic straw mat, was the repository for all sorts of objects. There, were the overshoes and cane which the old marquis used in his walks, Sabine's garden hat, her pruning shears, her prayer book and a certain basket ornamented with red wool, which the poor people and their children knew well for

miles around. Finally, if one saw upon the old hall table, some crushed violets, a riding whip, a felt riding hood, pair of gloves and a meerschaum pipe, they belonged to M. le Marquis, who has torn himself away from the pleasures of his handsome first floor suite in the rue de Marigan, to make a short visit to his mother and sister, to his colts and the Municipal Council.

Gaston de Reygnac and the dowager were introduced by a gray-haired man servant, easily recognized as one who had known the old Faubourg. It was enough to see the way he received, and announced through the open folding doors, the names of the two visitors. At the end of a very long drawing room, lighted by two windows and a glass door which led into the garden, the Marquise de Barjols was sewing, seated in a high-backed chair placed in a niche near one of the windows. At a little distance from her, the graceful figure of her daughter emerged from a pile of ivy and moss. Around her were a half-dozen of young girls in white bonnets, crouching down close at each other's heels rummaging with activity among the green. The long garlands twined



"At a little distance from her, the graceful figure of her daughter emerged from a pile of ivy and moss."

upon the floor, showed what kind of work they were busy with. While the new comers effected their entrance, and the marquise, with a grand air, took the four steps prescribed by etiquette to meet them, the group of young village maidens, upon a sign from their mistress, disappeared without noise through a back gate.

“Madame,” said the Countess de Reygnac with an old-style courtesy, “your son is my son’s friend; permit me to hope that I am not a stranger to you.”

“It has been several years,” replied the marquise smiling, “that we have known each other through our children. It is very little, madame. But I have become very provincial and see only a little of the world during the six weeks that I pass in Paris every spring.”

Gaston in his turn greeted Madame de Barjols, who welcomed him like a man of her world, without the least allusion to his official title. Then he approached Sabine, cleverly manoeuvring to remain seated near her after the general exchange of first civilities. He looked at her without her appearing to notice it, and was astonished at himself to feel that

he slightly trembled, for he was not romantic or timid in the least.

She slowly pulled off, with a movement full of grace, the long gloves that she had put on to select sprigs of moss, and brushed off listlessly with her white hand, any that remained attached to her dress.

Have you noticed that one should see truly refined women in their own homes, others elsewhere? Surprised thus, in the intimacy of her home life, Sabine was extremely gracious, and Gaston was astonished at one thing, that was, that he had not admired her more, three days before; but this time he made amends for lost time.

For all this, the conversation threatened to lag a little in the corner where the young people sat.

"My brother is not at home," said Mlle. de Barjols; "he has gone on horseback to visit the farms, he will be sorry to miss a part of your visit."

If politeness would have permitted it, Reygnac would have owned that he did not partake of his distress.

"And you," replied he, "are you going to

scold me for interrupting your work? Do you know to whom I compared you upon entering the room just now?"

"Oh! yes," said Sabine laughing, "to Calypso surrounded by her nymphs—Raoul said so an hour ago, it seems it is striking."

"I thought I had surprised Valleda putting away her harvest of mistletoe. I suspect you are making an arch of triumph; may I ask what great man is coming, it interests me a little, Monsieur le ——?"

"What! Is your police not better informed! Let us see: think. Who can it be!"

"The préfet? but no, I should know it. The bishop?"

"Better than that."

"The minister?"

"Better than that."

"The marshal?"

"Better than that, if you had heard the sermon Sunday——"

"I have it, you are dressing the altar for Corpus Christus day."

"You have guessed it, monsieur. We are very much behind the times at Barjols, for we still have processions, and the seigneurs have

kept up forced labor, as you must have seen."

"Yes! forced labor and also the tithe. Only they are the ones who pay it to the rustics. You see my police is not so very bad."

Sabine mechanically drew near her work, and Gaston watched her white hands moving gracefully among the green; observing that this silent inspection was not absolutely to the young lady's taste, he took some sprigs of green and tried to do the work himself.

"Monsieur," said Sabine with a sly gravity, "take care, you will obtain the indulgences. In your position, it is serious."

"Why? Do you believe me excommunicated?"

"Not yet, perhaps, but you are a sous-préfet!"

"On account of my sins. Meanwhile keep your idle story for another, I beg of you. My mother is here to tell you that I believe in God, and that I have been baptized."

"Is it possible!"

"Now," said Gaston, "do not mock me too much. I met a few days since a young girl brought up in a convent, who is an atheist."

"Oh!" cried Sabine looking at him with her large honest eyes, "how horrible!"

Reygnac did not say that the person he talked of was Henriette Loidreau, but, within himself, he compared the two girls, the two natures, and the two lives so opposite. He looked at his mother absorbed by her conversation with the marquise. He wanted to say to her: "Look at this one. How could you expect that I should think of the other!"

Meanwhile, courtesy exacted that he should talk to Madame de Barjols. He went, with some regret, to seat himself by the side of her arm chair.

"Monsieur," said this excellent lady, "Raoul likes you very much, he has often told me so."

"Madame, it is the best praise that his mother could give me, and above all, the least merited."

The marquise was a woman with white hair, an average intelligence, but with one quality which absorbed all others, goodness. Her sexagenarian smile of indescribable sweetness, called to mind the last puffs of mild air which pass over snow before winter has completely iced it. She had known life by her troubles,

rather than by her faults, for she had suffered, but never done wrong. For some time she had lived only to devote herself to others. Gaston, in spite of himself, compared her to his own mother. What a difference! To tell the truth—and he owned it to himself—there was reason in it.

Suddenly the marquise's still beautiful eyes sparkling with pleasure were turned toward the steps which led into the garden. Some one in riding boots ascended them exclaiming gayly, "My humble respects to my superior chief. How are you, oppressor of the people, blind supporter of the government, leech of the small purse, tool of the candidates——?"

Raoul stopped suddenly, biting his tongue. He did not know that his friend's mother was there, and asked himself as to whether his pleasantries would be to the taste of the lady with whom he was no favorite; in fact, the countess had always pretended to believe that her son was the victim of the bad example of others.

"A heart of gold!" said she; "but unfortunately easily influenced."

She returned rather coldly the marquis'

greeting, who excused himself for not having been to see her in Paris; they exchanged a few words; as soon as it was possible, Raoul arose.

"Dear mamma," said he, "if madame will allow us, we will go and leave you to talk together. I must show my horses and my sister's chickens. Will you come too, Sabine?"

The three young people made a tour of the stables, barns, poultry yards, and park. All was kept properly, but without extravagance. One could find, without looking very hard, grass in some of the walks. The cows were all merely native breed, but they gave enough milk for the inhabitants of the chateau, and for half a dozen sick children in the village. The chickens were not entered upon the "stud book" for thoroughbred cocks, but these fowls of simple habits did not feel that they had lowered themselves in laying eggs.

"Our wealthy neighbors at Fresnau," said Sabine, "swear only by the Durham, Southdown, and Brahma Pootra. They are more distinguished, but less practical. No milk, butter, or fresh eggs from those high-bred animals. Here we are less remarkable, but we

can have an omelette without sending to the market."

Raoul, who yet bore a grudge against his friend for his fidelity to the instructions given in favor of the candidature of Loidreau, shrugged his shoulders and burst out laughing.

"My poor sister! The high functionary who listens to you now, will pity you and your animals. You are only a peasant woman dressed in Sunday clothes. Tell me of Fresnau, where the shepherdess does the honors in silk stockings, satin slippers, and lace dresses."

With a little more temper than this innocent pleasantry required, perhaps, Gaston replied:

"Speak for yourself. Every one has his ideal. You will allow me to have my own opinion."

"Does not Henriette Loidreau please you?" asked Sabine.

"To say that she does not please me would be affectation. But she is like the animals in her park, of little practical beauty. Do not, if you please, Mlle., judge me by the charitable insinuations of your brother."

"Oh!" replied the young girl laughing, "I

do not judge people so quickly and only judge them by what I see and hear."

The conversation continued in this intimate tone, the presence of the marquis making it easy. They visited the stables, the only novelty about the place, constructed under the direction and after the taste of the young proprietor. When they went into the park, Sabine, with scissors in hand, stopped every little while to cut flowers to make a bouquet for her mother's guest.

A few moments after they returned to the drawing room, Madame de Reygnac spoke of ordering their carriage.

"The carriage!" exclaimed Raoul, "why, my dear madame, your coachman will not listen to that; you may be sure that he counts on his dinner and that of his horses. Leave Barjols when they are laying the cloth! You do not know the customs of this place. All the people about would say that we were on bad terms."

It was still daylight when they entered the dining room, whose walls were covered with fine tapestries celebrated throughout the country; this, with the old silver arranged without

pretension on the side-board, was the only sign of luxury in the room. The dinner was simple but of that abundant simplicity which indicates the custom of generous living. One single servant, the old man with white hair, passed the dishes quietly and without haste, like a servant who had known for a long time the tastes and desires of his masters. They talked quietly. Sabine, to beautify herself, had simply tucked up her hair, and put a ribbon about her neck. The odor of new-mown hay came in abundance through the open windows, and when the tinkling of a bell from the neighboring church was heard, the young girl lowered her eyes for a second's meditation. Reygnac felt his heart throb with a pious emotion hitherto unknown to him.

When he was in the carriage with his mother she said:

“What a difference between Fresnau and this place!” for at heart the luxuriousness of the Loidreaus pleased her.

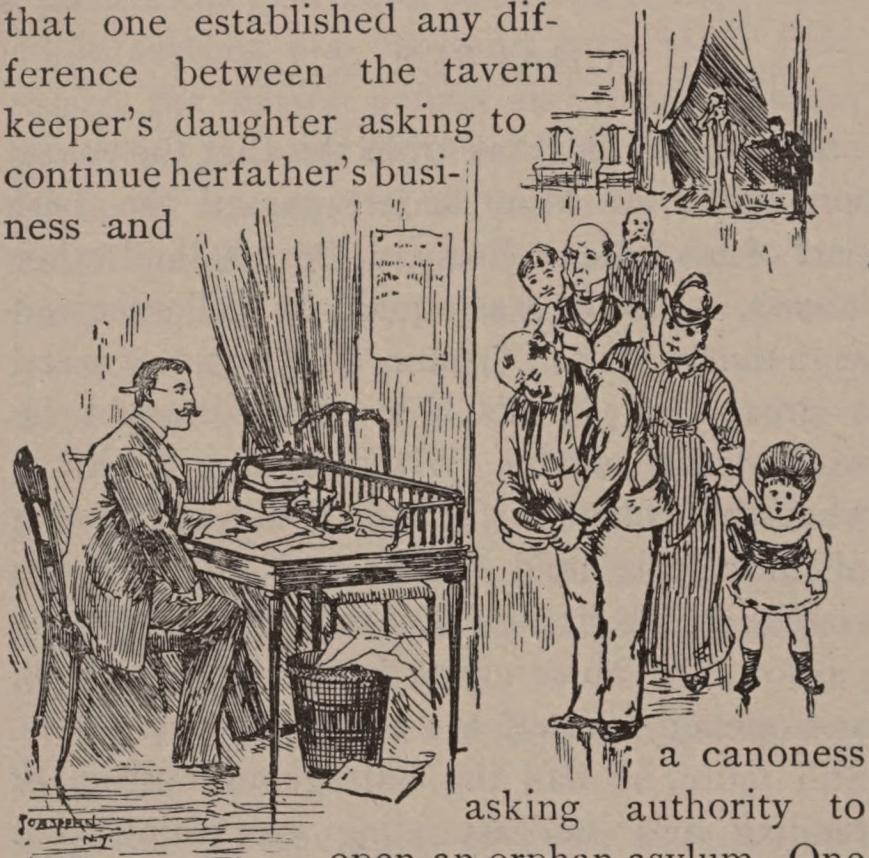
“Ah! yes,” replied Gaston, “what a difference!” And until they reached Montescourt he did not speak again.

CHAPTER XII.

ONE must not think from this that the young sous-préfet of Montescourt passed the best part of his time at Fresnau, Barjols, and other houses, where he was equally as well received as in the first two. Gaston de Reygnac worked a great deal in his office, they thought he worked too much. While waiting to know what would come of the Revolution of the 16th of May, this bold fellow had effected one change which Erasme Lefèvre could not easily pardon; he arose every day at eight o'clock, and opened, himself, the administrative letters. Still more, he had the outrageous custom of reading and understanding everything that he signed, and only signed polite letters and agreements written in good French, which the stern red-tapist called “corrupting the formulas.”

Reygnac in reality could not take part in that sublime rudeness, which is the fundamen-

tal basis of the written communications between the government and the people who style themselves the most civilized in the world. He could only admit under pretext of equality, that one established any difference between the tavern keeper's daughter asking to continue her father's business and



a canoness
asking authority to
open an orphan asylum. One

day, patient as he was, he was obliged to throw his secretary out of the office. The man, with a coarse slip of the tongue, in writing to one of the highest barons of European finance, persisted in commencing his letter with

these words, “Monsieur le banquier.” But the most unpardonable crime to Reygnac was to admit everybody. The greater part of the time those who came to see him, came to make complaints about the office; each visit was one grievance more. Soon the employés from the first to last were in a state of mild resignation with regard to their chief.

When his duties permitted he made his escape with pleasure to go into the country to the places where his presence could be most useful. One day he took the train to visit the insane asylum situated about three leagues from Montescourt. This establishment, like several others of the same kind, was once an old monastery known by the name of Saint Pardoult. It is situated at the bottom of a half-deserted gorge, the larger part occupied by buildings and the body of the park entirely closed by walls.

What had once been a beautiful, religious retreat with imposing architecture, had become, on account of its brick walls, board partitions, and iron ceilings, something unformed, mutilated, and hideous, which made the heart heavier than the wildest waste. In this asy-

lum—singular word to choose to designate a place where people are sent generally in spite of themselves—one found a thousand persons of all ages and sexes, though often the visitors would be embarrassed to tell the age or sex of the miserable creatures they saw. At the head of this institution for the insane, the department places a man who is physician and director at the same time. His salary of one hundred dollars a month, with apartments, heating, and the right to the vegetables in the garden, composed his income. His work consisted of caring for these poor creatures, to cure them very rarely, and to overtake them when they tried to escape, which was infinitely less rare.

He was also instructed to feed them with an economy, all the more faithfully guarded as the superintendent is responsible for all excess of outlay.

One should hasten to say that Dr. Doniol, which was the name of the superintendent of the institution when Gaston made his visit, performed his duties conscientiously and faithfully. Outside of his professional duties, which absorbed the greater part of the day, he di-

vided his leisure time between his family, music, and natural history.

His family consisted of four persons, Madame Doniol and three daughters, all of age, whose only recreation was in visiting the "paying patients" during their lucid moments. At first this exchange of society was imposed upon them by the sympathizing doctor as a professional duty, for he claimed that the conversation of healthy people had a happy influence upon the invalids. These conjectures were not wholly contradicted by the results; but while the doctor's patients seemed to improve upon the whole, his somewhat feeble daughters, on their part, experienced a metamorphosis the reverse. One could not say that they had become insane, but it was impossible to deny that they were beginning to be "singular."

Before they came to Saint Pardoult the mother and her daughters were very naturally looked upon as at the head of society in the county town of the district, of which the asylum formed one of the hamlets, being two or three kilometres from the town.

They had visited with the mayor's wife and

the curate's sister, been on intimate terms with the postmaster and justice of peace, at open war with the wife of the rival physician, on account of scientific brotherhood.

But as soon as the ladies of Saint Pardoult, as they were called in his little world there, associated with the patients of the husband and father, their contact with the outside world became less frequent. It was not, as one would think, that the outside world abandoned their drawing room, always embellished by the presence of one or two of the insane. It was the ladies themselves, who cared no longer for the conversation of the honest country people, when they regularly came in contact with heroines of romance, millionaires, and princesses, for these good creatures took seriously, all the hallucinations of the poor creatures. They gave them their titles, and talked with them of all their hopes and troubles. They said very seriously, "Has your majesty slept well?" "Did the Prince of Galles send you a bouquet this morning?" or "Has the bank yet paid you your five millions?"

How, then, after this, interest yourself in an old woman who boasts that her preserves are

put up in sugar! It resulted in such a complete rupture with the outside world, that all outside disturbance died at the foot of the asylum's high walls, and no sound went out of it. No strangers came there, except the inspectors and magistrates, who came to make their official visits, and sign the certificates of the destined ones.

When the heavy gate was closed upon the old barouche with drawn curtains, which brought from the neighboring station a new patient, he was dead to all the world, as much as if he had joined the Trappists.

Dr. Doniol received the sous-préfet, whom he had never met, with the deference due his station, because he was director of the Saint Pardoult Asylum, and was prouder of his rank as functionary than of all other physical or moral qualities that he could have. After a short conversation in an office strewed with animals dried and stuffed or preserved in alcohol, Gaston and the doctor commenced their visit to this immense establishment.

To see the order which reigned throughout, the strict discipline, the rigorous classification, the cleanliness, the care to avoid the most ex-

cited ones, one could believe himself aboard a packet ship with three classes of passengers.

The "departments" where the poorer class of both sexes, clothed in uniforms which resembled those of a prison, were packed in the halls, work rooms, dormitories, and yards.

The "mediums" or those whose friends could pay a small sum, were better clothed, if not better nourished, enjoying greater freedom and the privilege of being alone, which the greater part used with unsociable zeal.

Lastly, invalids of the first class, whose board varied, but was generally as high as five or six hundred francs a month, an enormous price for the country. They occupied apartments separated from the large house—namely some little houses scattered about the park, well kept and full of flowers. For two hours Reygnac walked about this strange cemetery, where the bodies are living, but the soul seems dead.

With his one key which opened all the doors, the doctor took him from one ward to another, without preparing him for any changes. He wished to see all—it was his duty and right. His heart ached in going through the wards

where the poor idiots, dressed like women, were seated in circles upon seats made expressly for them, making grimaces, crying, dumb, or repeating over and over again the same thing. In other places he was distressed to hear their heartrending cries. They opened a door, and he saw a bathing room with three or four bathtubs shut with a cover and padlock, which left only room for the shaved head of an hysterical patient to appear. In passing one of the cottages half concealed by trees, he heard a piano touched by skilful hands. Reygnac and the doctor entered. A young lady extremely pretty and well dressed, with a distinguished air, arose and welcomed them with perfect ease and grace. She was a very religious woman and awoke one day in her husband's chateau, dreaming that she had received in the night the frightful visit of the Anti-Christ. She believed herself damned and on the point of giving birth to some monster consecrated to the infernal one.

Finally they ended with the chapel. There, two or three religious ones were praying around the sacred lamp. Twenty of the insane were seated on the benches, looking at the pictures

with a sanctimonious air and mechanically turning their rosaries, or prostrate on the floor, beating their breasts with heavy groans. At the foot of the statue of the Mater Dolorosa an unknown person was kneeling at a prayer desk, her face buried in her hands. Her dress and attitude indicated a genteel person and not insane. Reygnac thought it might be one of the doctor's family, and without asking any questions passed by.

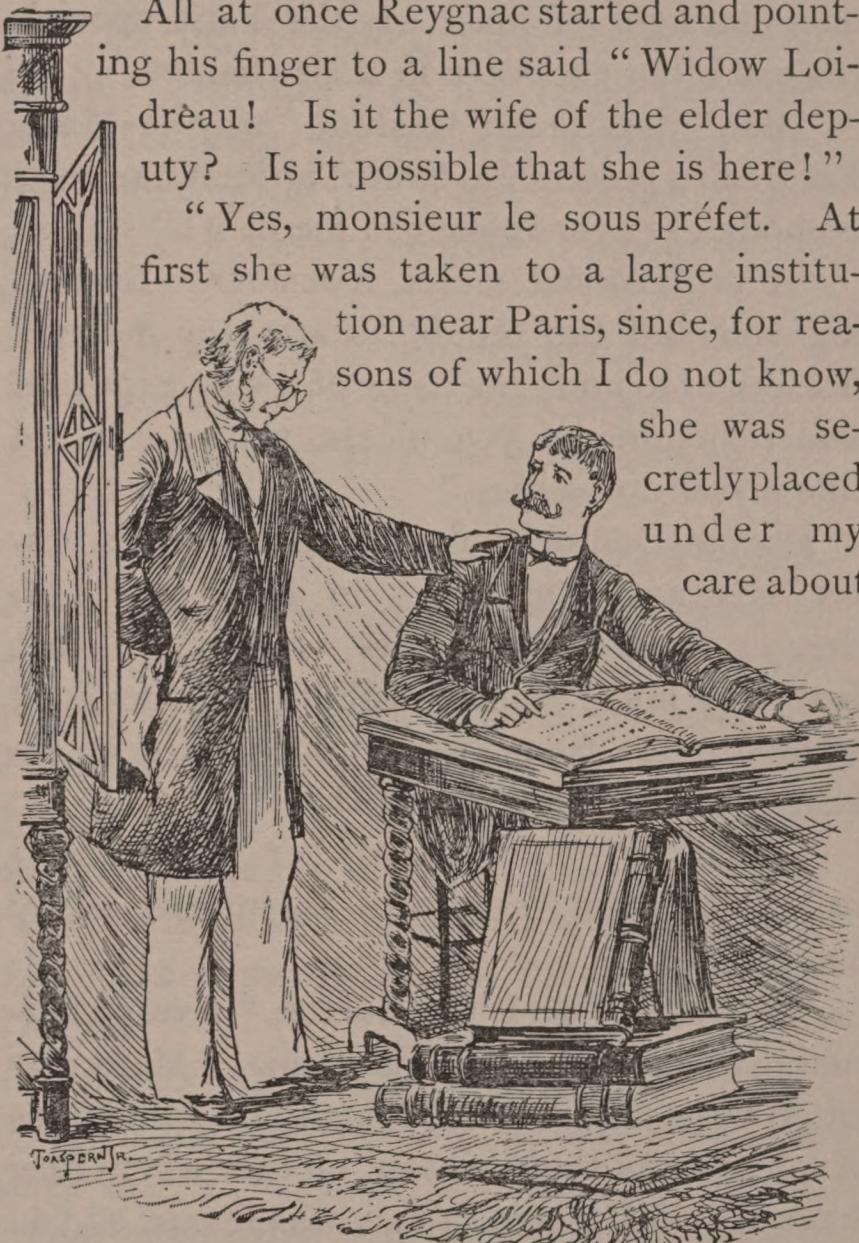
"There is nothing more," said Doctor Doniol, "but to show you my books and beg of you to sign them, a thing your predecessors were not very prompt to do. I could tell you of some who have come to Montescourt, and gone away, without ever having stepped inside of Saint Pardoult. Then people complain that the insane asylums lack inspection! Whose fault is it?"

Gaston turned the leaves of the enormous book where, for several years, long lines of names written in large letters extended over the ruled pages of numerous columns. At the last division one read at long distances, "gone away cured," but oftener when the column did not remain blank, one read "died."

All at once Reygnac started and pointing his finger to a line said "Widow Loidreau! Is it the wife of the elder deputy? Is it possible that she is here!"

"Yes, monsieur le sous préfet. At first she was taken to a large institution near Paris, since, for reasons of which I do not know,

she was secretly placed under my care about



"All at once Reygnac started, and pointing his finger to a line said, 'Widow Loidreau!'"

one year ago. I must say the Paris specialists are often excessive in their charges."

"But," questioned Gaston, "why is Mme. Loidreau's presence at Saint Pardoult a secret? Nobody has ever spoken to me of it!"

"A professional secret, monsieur. Excepting you and the republic's attorney, nobody has a right to know the name of a single inmate, and remember, if you please, you are bound like myself to secrecy."

Doctor Doniol spoke to the walls; his visitor was not listening. So Henriette Loidreau's mother was there! Instead of that luxurious home which was her own, she lived some leagues from Fresnau, secretly in an insane asylum! Poor woman!

"What do you think of her condition?" asked the young man with an interest easily understood.

"We have," said the doctor, "a very characteristic case of puerperal mania. Maternity often costs the life of a woman and sometimes it takes away their reason, oftener when they have reached a certain age, which was, as you are aware, the case with this lady. Strangely enough, this mental disorder often manifests

itself by the besetting idea of infanticide. Madame Loidreau has not killed her child, thank God! but she believes she has. The great suffering of this pious creature is, as I understood it, not to be able to repent of her crime."

"Is this kind of insanity incurable?"

"On principle, no, quite the contrary; but I have no hopes of curing the lady we speak of."

"Is she quiet?"

"Too much so; she refuses to speak to anybody. My wife and daughters have tried in vain to amuse her. Pursued, no doubt, by the thought of her imagined crime, she conceals herself and mistrusts everybody. She fears probably being pursued, for every morning she hurriedly reads her newspapers. For several months now, she has constantly carried with her a copy of *Figaro* carefully hidden in a bag."

"I would like to see her close by."

"We can meet her on her way when she leaves the chapel, were you saw her just now, without mistrusting it. But you will not get her to say one word."

Five minutes later, Gaston and the doctor

saw the lady coming toward them, having in her hand the alluded-to bag. In spite of her derangement, her face yet showed traces of great beauty. One would almost have known her by her resemblance to her daughter. At her approach, Reygnac took off his hat and advanced toward her some steps.

"Madame," said he, "I come to give you some news of your daughter Henriette."

The woman started as if stricken with terror, she looked at Gaston with that cautious sly look that one sees on the face of a detective, then she turned her eyes toward the doctor, whom she seemed particularly to fear. Upon a sign from the young man he withdrew some distance.

"Have you no word to send to your daughter?" asked Gaston in a low tone. "Will you not be glad to speak to a friend about her?"

"Do you come from her?" said the sick lady hesitatingly, "who will prove to me that you are a friend? How do I know that she really sends you?"

These words, truth and falsehood, do not have the same meaning when the lamp of reason is extinguished. Gaston replied without

scruple, curious to know what vagaries he was to hear.

"Would I be able to find you here otherwise? I come on her account and I know all."

Madame Loidreau seemed to make a violent effort to reflect. She asked, fixing her scared eyes upon the stranger who stood before her, "Perhaps you are a lawyer?"

"Yes. Will you tell me what troubles you?"

"I am not troubled for myself. All that one could make me suffer, is nothing to what I have suffered. What I have done, monsieur, was for my daughter."

"You love her very much, do you not?" The poor woman's face shone with a passionate tenderness as she replied:

"I committed a crime for her! But if I am discovered, if they punish me, my daughter also perhaps would be punished!"

"You have committed no crime," said Gaston, "you are deceived, the child is alive, I have seen him."

"Impossible! I made it disappear myself; I had to do it for Henriette's interest."

"Your daughter is rich enough to be willing to divide her fortune with her brother."

At these words, Madame Loidreau's face assumed an expression of despair and horror.

"Ah! unhappy creature that I am!" cried she, wringing her hands, "You know nothing, you have come to set a trap for me. Leave me, hateful man!"

And, without her interlocutor's daring to follow her, she ran away with a swiftness wonderful for her age.

"Poor woman!" said Reygnac to the doctor when he rejoined him, "she shows a singular mixture of confusion and logic."

"The wheel work is always there, but the machinery works wrong. This is the first time that I have seen her speak to a stranger."

"Does her family visit her?"

"Ah! monsieur le sous-préfet, the families! I have no need to enjoin upon them the duty of quiet for my patients."

One hour later, Reygnac reached his home and found there the candidate Loidreau and his niece, come to return the countess' call of the preceding week. As it was late, Henriette and her uncle soon arose to take their departure, but, in conducting them to their carriage, Madame de Reygnac managed to remain

in the background with M. Loidreau. They talked together for about five minutes, when the good man left with a radiant face.

On her side, the young girl talked to Gaston, who had, it seemed to her, a very sober face.

"It seems that you go out a great deal," said she to him.

"It is my business; it is necessary to show myself among the good people."

"And what portion of your good people has had the honor to see you to-day?"

"I went," replied Gaston with diplomacy, "to inspect the track of a new railroad."

Henriette seemed in good spirits, and quite disposed to talk, but the count let the conversation drop. Seeing the elegance and smile of this beautiful girl, he thought of the poor insane woman he saw at Saint Pardoult, and in spite of himself, he felt a grudge against the girl, that she could be happy, while so near her mother, yet separated in such a manner.

If he could have known all that was at the bottom of that soul at this moment, it would not have been for the poor creature deprived of reason and intelligence that he would have

had the most pity. When the landau left the court, Madame de Reygnac took her son's arm and drew him mysteriously into the garden.

"I have just given Monsieur Loidreau two good pieces of news."

"Is that why he left in such good spirits? Has he been decorated?"

"Not yet, but what is better for him, the committees now urge the Marquis de Barjols to withdraw his name as candidate."

"Knowing Raoul's love of quiet, I think they will have no trouble in gaining his consent; and are you the one who has done this?"

"Not at all; you are the one; ask the person who has just left here; I have made him think that you wished to be his unknown benefactor; if I had not prevented it, he would have kissed your hands."

"You did well to prevent it. And the second news?"

"Still better yet. The marshal in his trip which has been organized, consents to stop at Montescourt. For a moment I really believed that our man would push his niece into your arms forthwith."

"Ah! my dear mother, you are so clever that you startle me! The marshal here! Do you really believe this?"

"We shall be sure of it in two days, but I am certain of it. They will bestir themselves readily for us at the Elysée. My son, you will see great things; it is I who tell you so!"

"I believe anything possible now. You frighten me, I repeat it. What a pity that one cannot offer you an office!"

"Much obliged; I prefer to busy myself with the wedding trousseau. It is easier."

"But you would be sure, at least, of not making two people unhappy then."

CHAPTER XIII.



THE countess's information was soon confirmed on all sides. A week had not passed before paragraphs, discreetly conceived, appeared in certain journals announcing to the public that:

“The only conservative candidate in the

district of Montescourt seems to be M. Loidreau, deputy retiring." Almost at the same time the same papers said "M. Loidreau, retiring deputy and conservative candidate for the department of Montescourt, has urgently solicited the marshal to favor the honest and industrious people of Montescourt with a visit. We understand that this desire is to be gratified, and that the marshal will be in this little city the day and night of ——"

Following were some lines suggesting the idea that the president would not have troubled himself, if the candidate had been less dear to him, and less useful to the nation. But as it was important to disseminate this truth among the people, the next day twenty thousand circulars were sent to the electors to spread abroad the good news. Loidreau, radiant, made the remark that "for the first time since the beginning of our history, the head of the state visits Montescourt."

He modestly insinuated that it was nobody's fault, not even his, if he, Justin Loidreau, was the first person who had been able to procure for his native place such a distinction.

As for Reygnac, he thought with terror of

what his position might become in the next ten days. Without his mother, he would have killed himself with work, but as one has already seen and will yet more, this improvised directress was made of the same stuff as Catherine de Medicis.

At first it was necessary to call together the mayors of the different cities and to arrange with them upon the choice of delegations who should join in the procession. There, for the first time they came into collision in a serious way with Magalas' influence. In his journal he attacked them outright, and in his inflammatory proclamations adjured his adherents not to move. Some of them obeyed, and Gaston, like the prophets, was obliged to go into the country and mountains seeking those who would not come to him.

Sometimes, if one can believe the legend, the "mountain came to Mahomet;" while the stubborn mayors were not to be found when their chief presented himself to them. One could dispense with their co-operation, talk right and left, intrigue, negotiate, promise, put in motion all the energy of a refined diplomacy with these countrymen, who perhaps did not

know how to read, but in matters of stratagem and defiance, would have checkmated Talleyrand himself.

At the same time it was necessary to make out a list of the candidates, to help them with money, red ribbons, and academical palms. Colossal work, for everybody wanted something. Peasants who had never owned a sheep, produced documents in due form establishing the loss of a flock by rot. Widows sent in their names for a license to sell tobacco, may be to bring up their numerous families when they had children, or perhaps, in case of complete solitude, because they had no one to support them. But what must be heard were the demands of the lovers of decorations. There were three hundred of them to five crosses for distribution.

"We saved the party," said one with noble pride. "It depends upon us to lose it," insinuated others, with an air of menace. During this time, Loidreau, the former justice of peace, and Magalas, the retired veterinary surgeon, strained every nerve. Taken together, they were two formidable adversaries, but in the remote parts of the desolate villages, in the

midst of the plains, the prestige of the second in reality prevailed. For all, he was the physician "for the beasts," that is to say, he was something more than the healer of men; for many, a very useful agent in the markets; for others, when the cow died in spite of his care, a person with an evil eye, for Magalas was not a fool, and shrewdly managed so as to get out of all difficulties. Although he had only practised this since engaging in politics, he carried in the box of his cart his surgical case with its instruments, somewhat rusty, and between two electoral conversations, he had always an inflammatory speech, or a tent for a seton, at the service of those who were his declared adherents.

Meanwhile, there was not a moment's rest for either; Loidreau travelled over one side of the country while Magalas dashed through the other, like cavalry charges sweeping over the ground in every direction. By way of artillery, "proclamations," "declarations," "appeals to our friends," "responses to our adversaries," covered the walls with their multicolored placards. The men who posted the bills had no rest night or day; the paste flowed in streams.

The city which went to sleep poppy colored, awoke bright yellow. Soon the public and private dwellings were not sufficient for their zeal, the paint brush attacked nature herself. From one side of the road to the other, the poplars became eloquent, they sent back and forth, from each other, violent reproaches for disloyal manœuvring. On the hill side, the rocks seemed to grow larger, struggling to see which would carry highest toward the heavens the names of these two rival candidates, which the very air was absorbing. Sometimes the placards became facetious. One morning, one could see not far from Fresnau some cattle quietly browsing on the fresh grass, without suspecting that they carried pasted on their sides a full statement of treacherous slander against their foster father.

Meanwhile, Reygnac, shut up in his office, felt his hair was turning gray, while he made out the list of invitations for the banquet in the evening and the reception which was to follow it. On this ground the difficulties threatened to become inextricable. One day, for example, three druggists presented themselves before him, respectful but firm. In ordinary

times these rivals would not salute each other on the street, but reunited in the face of a common danger, they came in a body to protest against the blow given to their professional dignity. It was noised abroad that they were not down upon the list of invited guests! Not invited, they!



Was it possible? What! those who prescribed the remedies figure among the chosen, and those who prepared them stay outside! Why this difference? Pharmacists have their diplomas as well as physicians. Do they not hold as much, even more, the life of the public in their hands, or at least in their bottles? And as they said in an associate

letter to the *Democrat*, “Did not Æsculapius himself bow down before the science of the Centaur Chiron?”

Hearing of the proceedings of the dispensers of quinine, the principal grocers organized in their turn a demonstration. “We also,” stated they, “sell linseed, pills, and mineral waters; shall we be treated any worse than these gentlemen, because we sell cheaper than they, these soothing and purgative remedies? If it is necessary in order to be received into society to decorate our front windows with yellow and green bottles, we are ready to assume the expense.”

However, in the midst of these disagreeable fusses, the unhappy Gaston had at least one agreeable hour. It was when he saw the bailiffs from the different districts (there were a dozen of them) come to humble themselves before him. He had more than once in his life received some members of this corporation, but on occasions when his rôle had not been so easy. This time, he could take his revenge, as he had nothing to fear and not without reason.

Picture to yourself a handful of Huns beg-

ging the honor of being invited to the fêtes at Rome the next day after the death of Attila! Poor bailiffs! Asking in vain, with a contrite air and flexible spine, the same treatment as the lawyers and solicitors, their natural allies in official war. They pleaded their cause before a judge too much prejudiced against them.

“Gentlemen,” said Reygnac in a very grave tone of voice, “‘huissier’ is a word derived from ‘huis.’ It is a word which also means door—draw your own conclusions.”

They concluded by throwing themselves furiously into the Magalas party, who found in them powerful auxiliaries, and constantly darting off in the exercise of their duties to all parts of the country, while the druggists resolutely attended to their customers, distilling with an equally sure hand drops of laudanum and gratuitous spite, but no less dangerous than the most subversive doctrines.

Gaston’s mother had charge of the material part of the organization, and certainly it was no little thing to do. She superintended a cleaning such as the house had never before seen; planted flowers in the garden, hung

paper in the chambers, replaced broken dishes with new ones, and by her exertions the menu became more elaborate; she engaged servants necessary for the household, selected the furniture to be repaired and hung up Venetian lanterns. Everybody recognized her to be a superior woman; the architect consulted her about the decorations for the mayor's house, the leader of the brass band arranged with her upon the choice of selections.

She corresponded by direct or indirect means with the prefecture, the minister, and also with the Elysée. She had grown twenty years younger, and in her imagination she saw her son engaged to an heiress, decorated, and préfét.

To begin with, as a proof of her superior skill, she had the bright idea to attach to herself Henriette Loidreau as lieutenant-general. Her uncle, dazzled by it, consented to the combination with joy. He offered also his movable furniture. If the marshal did not sleep under his roof, at least he should sleep in his sheets, and in some way it would be known to the electors.

Every morning a carriage loaded with divers articles, carried Mlle. Loidreau to the sous-

préfecture, were she passed a part of the day, and was already treated by the countess in a quasi maternal manner. When it was necessary to ask any question of Gaston, which happened two or three times an hour, she always sent Henriette. But Gaston did not think of abusing the situation. He answered politely but without saying one word more than was necessary, often like a man slightly tired of being interrupted. He was tired it is true, not because he was interrupted, but because it was not another person who disturbed him. The more he saw of Henriette, the more he thought of Sabine.

Loidreau's niece noticed this coldness, which she attributed to a remnant of spite. At all events, not being in the secret, she had a little grudge against Reygnac for taking so slight an interest in the party. As it always happens in such cases, the more indifferent he was, the more she persisted. Often pretending to be tired, she would seat herself and enter into conversation with him, seeming to think that nobody could have anything better to do than to joke with her.

One day when rummaging, like a spoiled

child, among the papers which covered his desk, she placed her hand upon a little book without title, which resembled both a dictionary and an arithmetic. The book had an air of mystery which puzzled her. She asked some questions; Reygnac was forced to tell her that this little book of cabalistic signs was the key to his telegrams in cipher.

Of course she was not for stopping when on so good a trail, and Reygnac finally, to get rid of her, gave her a lesson upon the way to use this mysterious book, swearing to her that he committed a crime of high treason, and that he risked his head for her. Overjoyed, like all women who gather—or think they do— forbidden fruit, and wishing to put it into practice, she took a sheet of paper and a pencil and without saying a word seated herself in a corner, while Gaston continued his work. At the end of about five minutes, she handed him the sheet upon which she had written several characters.

“Let us see if you will be able to decipher my despatch,” said she.

Gaston with a certain curiosity took the key and wrote the translation.

"The Count de Reygnac is a charming man, but he has some grudge."

"Not bad for a beginner," said he, "now it is your turn to decipher."

Henriette took the scrawl that Gaston handed to her and with her pencil wrote down the following translation:

"A man forewarned is forearmed."

Her face, bent over the table a few inches from Gaston, had a singular smile, but before either had time to speak, somebody knocked at the door. It was Perrin, her uncle's secretary. The young girl made a slight but haughty bow, and went out with a majestic slowness.

For several days, or to be more precise, since Mlle. Loidreau had become the habitual guest at the sous-prefecture, this young advocate made frequent visits there. He presented himself, of course, as sent on business for his patron, sometimes having information to ask, and sometimes a recommendation to give. Often he brought, before sending to the printer, a manifesto or an article for the *Journal*.

Reygnac could not excuse himself from seeing him, but he submitted with an instinctive feeling of repulsion for this cold, correct man,

always well dressed and whom it was impossible to look straight in the face. As usual he extended his hand a little absent-mindedly, then, after inquiring the object of the interview, said he:

“Seat yourself at this table and write a note, while I go and make inquiries in the office.”

Left alone, the secretary commenced to write, when suddenly his pen stopped. He saw a piece of paper covered with a correspondence in cipher and his practised eye recognized easily Gaston’s handwriting as well as Henriette’s.

“Ah!” said he after reading it, “we have gone as far as this already. Encouragement on one side, defiance on the other, and both in a charming spirit. Yes, certainly, my beautiful young lady, ‘a man forewarned is forearmed;’ you will find it so before long.” As he commenced to write again, he stopped once more with a deep frown. Decidedly this was a day of interesting discoveries! His pen between his teeth, his ears on the watch, he held in his hands a letter headed with these words—“Saint Pardoult Asylum.” At the top of the sheet, diagonally across one corner, was

the word “confidential,” but Perrin was not frightened at so little a thing, “for,” thought he, “it is I who should have been sous-préfet at Montescourt; the missive is partly for me.”

Doctor Doniol—for it was he who wrote—commenced by one or two obsequious phrases upon the honor of the visit paid him, after which he continued in these words:

“Pardon me for troubling you at this time, when you are absorbed with serious duties; for myself, the world consists only of my patients. Since your short interview with Madame Loidreau, I have noticed a great change in this poor lady’s condition, and I wish very much to have you see her again. For the first time, since she was confided to my care, she asked to see me and questioned me about you, with a shade of good sense mixed with her ordinary hallucinations. Do you exert upon her a magnetic influence, such as I have observed in analogous cases? Or have you suddenly, vaguely startled her benumbed intellect by pronouncing the name of her daughter, of whom we rarely speak? One thing is certain; that is, that she seems disposed to come out of her speechless condition, and I see in this symptom considerable hope.”

The doctor ended by expressing with many apologies the hope of seeing the sous-préfet at Saint Pardoult as soon as he should be free from the excitement of the presidential tour.

"If I am not very much mistaken we are both upon the same trail," murmured Perrin, "and I have taken this young aristocrat for a simpleton! Well! it will be necessary to play my trumps sooner than I expected."

Perrin discreetly placed the letter which he had just read under some other papers, and Gaston de Reygnac entering soon after, found him completely absorbed in his work.

This day the dinner was served in the garden, the dining room being in possession of the decorators. The countess, Henriette, and her son silently ate their dinner upon the corner of a rustic table. At dessert Madame de Reygnac, who was sent for to give an order, left her seat.

"How long has Perrin been with your uncle?" asked Gaston of Henriette when they were alone.

"My uncle has had him in his employ since he entered the Chamber of Deputies. Since you speak of him to me, I will take occasion to give you some useful advice. Mistrust him as you would fire, for he detests you with all his villainous heart."

"He! I would like to know why! the idea!"

The young lady's face deepened with a scowl that one saw there sometimes and which gave her an almost hard look. She replied, as with a nervous gesture she crushed a wasp that had been attracted by the odor of the fruit, "He ha'es you for two reasons; the first is, that he expected to have the place you now have."

"My faith! I would have given it to him willingly; and the second reason of his hatred?"

"This can only be confided to a true friend and I hope that you are one. You remember a rather stormy conversation we had in the park at Fresnau a certain evening?"

"As if it happened yesterday," said Reygnac bowing without a smile.

"You will understand the state of irritation that you found me in then; I will tell you in the first place that this Perrin, who is the most contemptible of beings, has dared to have designs upon me and does not make any secret of it."

"Why do you not have your uncle discharge him?"

"Ah!" said Henriette, "you do not know—

you do not understand what ambition will do to a man of my uncle's temperament. Before he was my guardian, he was a candidate. He needed Perrin and Perrin lived with him. You can imagine my rage. Not only is this miserable creature not discharged, but he watches everybody who comes near me. Spare me these long details. To be brief, you have given him umbrage."

"Mademoiselle," said Reygnac, after a moment's silence, "I understand many things now; one would believe that nobody could have rest here below, since you do not have it; you have everything that heart could wish. But to return to monsieur, who concerns us now, and who is, I suspect, a cowardly scamp. The day that it becomes necessary to get rid of him, count upon me."

"Alas!" replied Henriette, "the thing is not so easy. Whatever happens, you are the first man who has said one comforting word to me. Thanks, Monsieur de Reygnac, I do not now feel so entirely alone. Will you give me your hand?"

"Both; now I must run away, work presses. Good-by, and don't be sad."

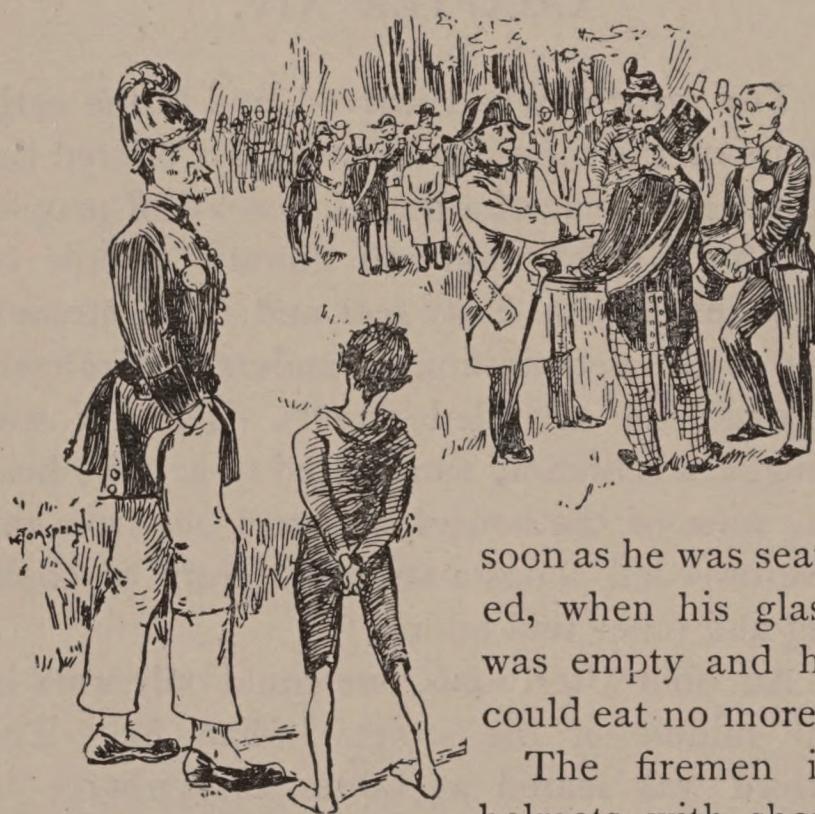
He went away without looking back, followed by her eyes, full of tears, the first that had soothed for many months the grief of a despairing and unhappy heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE great day had arrived, and in the early hours of the morning Montescourt offered the odious spectacle of a frightful crowd of people. Seven or eight thousand country people of both sexes, with dusty feet and faces streaming with perspiration, wandered carelessly through the crowded streets. The air was muggy, a scorching sun heated to a white heat the sides of the houses, and sent out from the overcrowded shops a strong mixture of cooking and other foul odors.

An hour after noon, one could only walk in the middle of the street, Indian file. The crowd was seated at tables everywhere; in the hotels, in private houses, opened to the public on this occasion, upon the sidewalks, even in the streams which were dried up. Alas! The air was full of the odor of frying fat. The pavements were covered with broken fragments and bones, mixed with papers bright-

ened in spots by melted lard. Some drunken persons commenced to be noisy, but the majority of the people gave way to the heavy torpor which came over the countryman as



soon as he was seated, when his glass was empty and he could eat no more.

The firemen in helmets, with short white trousers exposing their brown ankles, touched glasses with the mayors, already girdled with their sashes, or with the game-keepers dressed with their caps and shoulder belts with large copper plaques. A wonderful thing! but

among this mass of men, you could not find one in ten who was unprovided with a distinctive sign of some sort, as the French, independent above all, love to show by some especial form of head gear that they belong to something or somebody. One could recognize by their head dress the orphans, gymnasts, collegians, signal men, post and telegraph boys, as well as military men. One must look a long time to find the immaculate straw hat of a simple citizen. As well look for a large stone without inscription on the plains of Piræus.

At two o'clock a movement was made; a platoon of mounted guardsmen who had arrived the day before from a neighboring garrison, started for the station, and involuntarily everybody kept silence during the passage of these fine fellows, who had spent twelve hours sprucing up for the occasion.

In their train the crowd followed, but were checked by the foot soldiers, who, moved at the thought that they were to see the marshal of France, were visibly disturbed to have to interfere with all these good people who had come from such a distance to see him. Then

commenced the procession: musical societies, firemen, municipal and scholastic delegations, then at a lively pace came the carriages containing Reygnac and his préfet, the general and other officials of a high rank. Lastly came Loidreau's sumptuous carriage, but empty, which was reserved for the honor of carrying the president of the republic. At last the train arrived. The drums beat a salute, the soldiers presented arms; an imposing sight, which becomes ridiculous when done for a man dressed in a frock coat. This time, at least, the person who stepped from the car, called forth quite naturally these homages. He was in full uniform, and at a distance one could distinguish at once the broad red ribbon (Knight of St. Louis) and his face, red also, showing off the whiteness of his hair and his drooping moustache. Slightly blinking his eyes, overcome with the heat, he faced the sun with the same calm resignation that he would have endured the infernal fire of the enemy during the entire day at one of those battles called by the Germans, "*le demon de la guerre.*" Soon the speeches commenced. The préfet arose and was especially brief, as he

would have preferred to say nothing had it been possible. The mayor threatened to be lengthy, but he became mixed up with his notes—which cut off at one blow the most interesting part of his speech. Some of the auditors not initiated into the mysteries of official eloquence, wondered, and with reason, to hear the marshal reply to things that had not been said. Usually, those in power offend oftener in omitting to reply to what is asked them. All at once when they supposed the oratorical part was ended, Magalas was seen coming from no one knows where, with a paper in his hand. Reygnac was on his guard. God only knows what words would have come out of the mouth of this hostile man, but, before he had time to open it, the orchestra, well disciplined, burst with a crash into the march from Faust. Thus formerly, the rolling of a drum ordered by Santerre, drowned the last speech of an unfortunate king.

It is true in politics that the same tricks always succeed.

From this moment until midnight, or thereabouts, the unfortunate president could not count upon one minute alone.

At first they conducted him to the mayor's, where seated in an arm chair in the largest room, he saw march before him several thousand electors, generally silent from prudence. Then came the exciting moment when the decorations were to be given. The new chevaliers advanced as they were called by Reygnac, trembling, uneasy, some of them ready to cry. In a short speech Reygnac recapitulated the titles of honor that they were to receive and gave into the hands of the head of the state the Russia leather casket holding the glorious star. An aide-de-camp in shoulder knots presented a pin, and the marshal fastened the decoration to the motionless coat before him, saying in a low, clear voice:

“Very good! Very good!”

The new Knight of the Legion of Honor, with head bent, tried in vain to thank him. They quietly pushed him along to make room for another, and he went away happy, squinting to see in the mirrors the effect of the glorious red spot upon his left breast.

The last cross distributed, there remained now the tiresome duty of visiting the public institutions; fortunately they were rare at

Montescourt. They went to the church, the hospital, and the one manufactory in the city. They finished with the college, where the mothers of the pupils were gathered in great force, less for the hero of Magenta, than to hear their sons' speeches. All the pupils of the higher classes were to speak successively, that there need be no jealousy, but the inflexible Reygnac with his watch in his hand, soon took away his illustrious guest from the family fête, which threatened to have a next day. They regained the sous-préfecture, where the guests invited to dinner awaited them. The escort was dismissed. Happy escort! As to the president, he had only time to offer his arm to Mme. de Reygnac and conduct her to the table; Gaston had Mme. du Villars at his right.

"Well!" asked she, unfolding her napkin, "what do you think of the day?"

"I think that the workmen at Belleville would barricade themselves if they were obliged to work like this. And all this for Loidreau!"

"Ungrateful man!"

"I repeat it; all this for Loidreau!"

"The true candidate here is yourself, and your candidature is called *Henriette*."

"One can see that you have been talking with my mother."

"Ah! my friend, what an intelligent woman! She will succeed in all that it pleases her to undertake, but between you and me you are fortunate to have her."

"And what do you think of the election?"

"Of the election! We can count upon an imposing majority; I repeat it for the fiftieth time to-day."

"On which side will this imposing majority be?"

"Pooh! walls have ears. Let me tell you, monsieur, hurry to be on the safe side—I would like very well to be in your place. All the majorities in the world would not disturb me."

At dessert, there was only one toast, a happy improvisation of Perrin's and given by Loidreau. Happy Loidreau! For six long hours he was the most important man in France. It was for him that the president had come to face all this display, and risked a stroke of apoplexy. At this very moment the telegraph

was carrying his words. To-morrow, all the journals would reproduce them. Ah! the glorious day!

As it always should be—so they say—wits jump together, at the very moment that Loisdreau was assuming an air of importance in the sunlight of his own glory, Magalas, who was not at the banquet, finished a masterly article with these words:

“The glorious day! In a few hours, a former justice of peace will have cost France one hundred thousand francs. The most expensive of the favorites in the old régime could not have done better. Let it be said without offence to anybody, that at the same price, we would have preferred in place of the triumph of this puppet, that of a Pompadour or Montespan. The feast of the mind could not have been less; that of the eyes would have been greater.”

At nine o’clock, after drinking their coffee in as hurried a manner as if in a railroad station, the guests left the table for the drawing rooms, already filled. Of all the projects on the programme, the party was the one which gave Reygnac the most uneasiness. The result

justified his fears. The reception was only one uninterrupted succession of lamentable and comical incidents.

Some of the guests drank too freely of champagne and became rude to the ladies, obliging the master of the house to interfere all the more severely, as generally the offending parties had not the excuse of an enticing temptation.

Others, mistaking the meaning of the numbers for the cloak room, took Gaston aside for a serious talk and to inquire as to the hour when they drew for the lottery. Toward the close of the evening, a lady who had borrowed a friend's dress for the occasion, and who was more corpulent, made a frightful scandal. Without her suspecting it, some pins that were badly put in, failed her; a little more and she would have been out of her dress. Fortunately Reygnac had an eye for everything. He looked for her husband and found him seated at play, and prevailed upon him, not without trouble—the poor man was just gaining twenty-five francs—to take his wife away before she became entirely naked.

One will never know by strength of what

transactions Gaston and his mother had obtained the promise that the noblesse of the city and its surroundings would be present at this party. Perhaps it would have been as well not to have taken so much trouble to bring about so small a result. These aristocrats really came, but "if their bodies were there, one felt that their souls were elsewhere." The men came in upon tiptoe and the ladies gathered up their dresses, then all established themselves in a little parlor, which was soon deserted by 'the others' and they never stirred from their chairs.

About ten o'clock Madame Justin Loidreau and her niece came in, creating quite a sensation. The préfet offered his arm to the deputy's wife, and Reygnac to Henriette, whose beauty and irreproachable elegance would have been remarked in any of Paris' most brilliant balls.

"Mon Dieu!" said Reygnac gayly, "what time lost! What a pity to waste such splendor on this mob of ugly creatures."

"I am enchanted, monsieur, if my dress pleases you."

"Bah! you know very well that I am not

speaking of your dress. Does one see that only ? If you wish anybody to look at that, close your eyes."

"Thanks for the compliment; I hope you had less trouble to compose and learn it than my poor uncle did with his. Did he recite it well?"

"Not badly; I see him looking for you now."

Loidreau, red and hurried, came up to her. "Come, my niece, I wish to introduce you to our dear marshal."

Almost at the same instant the Marquis de Barjols appeared with his sister.

"Are you happy," said Raoul, as he seized his friend's hand, "here I am! I abdicate, I submit, I sacrifice myself to Loidreau, the sole and only one. What must I do? Kiss the hem of his coat, or crawl at his enormous feet? Enjoy your triumph. What will you give me the day of his coronation?"

"I shall not see that day," said Reygnac, offering his arm to Mlle. de Barjols; "I shall be dead with fatigue before then."

"Ah! mademoiselle, what a day!"

"At least," asked she in her musical voice, "you are nominated préfet?"

In aiding her through the crowd, he looked at her with great admiration. He waited until she raised her eyes before replying, but in a tone far from joking. "You would not care then if I was far away from Montescourt?"

"Probably," said she bowing her head, "I am less anxious for it than you are."

As he opened his mouth to reply, she continued a little hurriedly,

"I see your mother making signs to me, let us go to her."

Loidreau's niece was seated beside the countess.

"Good evening, Henriette," said Sabine, with her frank cheerful smile; "how beautiful you are!"

"Good evening, Sabine," said the other. "You are lovely!"

By a single word the two girls had painted themselves *vice versa*. In spite of her twenty-three years, Raoul's sister appeared the younger of the two. Her fresh white muslin dress, her large, deep, calm, blue eyes gave her a youthful air, happy, confident, quietly awaiting her destiny.

Henriette, much handsomer, but of that

restless, proud beauty of a true brunette, was the living antithesis of her schoolmate. Her red dress, too elegant for a young girl, her shoulders and magnificent arms were boldly exposed, and while she talked to Sabine, her large black eyes glittered proudly with a feverish excitement, where the next moment one could see a misty cloud of sadness.

Gaston, after leaving Mlle. de Barjols, went away, recalled by other duties, but not without throwing behind him one last expressive look. As he passed through the crowd, drawing near the august circle, where the great personages were holding forth, he found himself before Madame du Villars, who had been watching him for five minutes

“So then,” said she to him in a low tone, stopping his passage, “this is the way you steer your barque!—”

He knew her thoughts, for she had her eyes fixed upon Sabine. He replied, very seriously:

“You are right; that is the barque which leads me. What would you have! one cannot be made over.”

“You are a fool; I judged you the first

time I saw you; but who knows? You are not alone in the barque and your mother is a good pilot. The difficulty is, Mademoiselle de Barjols is very pretty."

Suddenly the first rockets were sent off on the terrace, causing everybody to go into the garden. A clever strategist, the marshal profited by this diversion to beat a retreat and went to bed. He had only a short time to sleep. Early in the morning he continued his journey, to recommence a little farther on, the same festivities as at Montescourt.

After the last rocket, the crowd pushed about the dressing room. The train had already borne away the distinguished visitors from the county towns. In the yard, the carriages of the neighboring families were passing out; the last one was the one belonging to the Marquis de Barjols. As they went to close the gate, the horses, frightened by the noise, shied and broke the pole. While Raoul busied himself trying to temporarily repair the damage, Gaston made Sabine leave the carriage and go into the parlor, now completely empty.

"I pity you," said the young girl, "we shall

prevent you from going to bed after this horrible day."

"A day finished thus is a beautiful one," said Reygnac, giving her a seat in an arm chair, while he stood a few paces from her.

A little disturbed at this beginning, she looked around the empty room and said: "Has your mother already retired?"

"Here, alone with me, you are as well watched over as by my mother herself. Ah! I have well earned these few moments. Yes, you are right, it was a horrible day; a day of falsehoods and comedies. How many times this evening I have looked at you, to see at least a face that reflected the truth, which did not play a rôle."

"I too," replied she, reassured, "I have looked at you, in the midst of all these restless busy men; you had the air of a man out of his sphere, and I said to myself, 'What is he here among this crowd for?'"

"What one does in such a place is to work hard and expiate the past. You have read stories of bad subjects that are sent off as cabin boys."

Sabine could hardly keep from smiling.

Understanding her thoughts, Gaston said to her: "You find me a little too old for that employment? Alas! I do too. Twenty times a day I say to myself, that I have made a failure of my life."

"You look at things on the dark side; you are, on the contrary, upon the road to success."

"Am I on the road to happiness?"

"There are so many ways of understanding happiness!"

"No, no more than there are different ways of understanding health. One can readily see that you have never been ill or unhappy. You spread about you health, hope, and happiness; you are so good, so gracious, and so sweet!"

"I wish that my brother could hear you! He says, sometimes, I am enough to make a saint swear."

"You would make a devil love virtue. At this moment, because you are near me, it seems to me that I am worth something, and I am happy to live; but when you are gone, I shall be worse than before. Beggars feel hungrier than ever, the day after they have had a good dinner."

"It is not what mine say," said Sabine

smiling, "fortunately they do not resemble you."

"I can well believe it: they see you every day! They know that you often think of them. How I envy them!"

"Do not envy them," said she blushing slightly; "I cannot think of my poor people without thinking of you. The first time that we met, you were very kind to them."

"I wish," said he, with impetuosity, "that you would put me to the test, by asking something very difficult! If you could know with what pleasure——" She interrupted him, a little disturbed and fearing that this poor beggar would end by asking too great a favor:

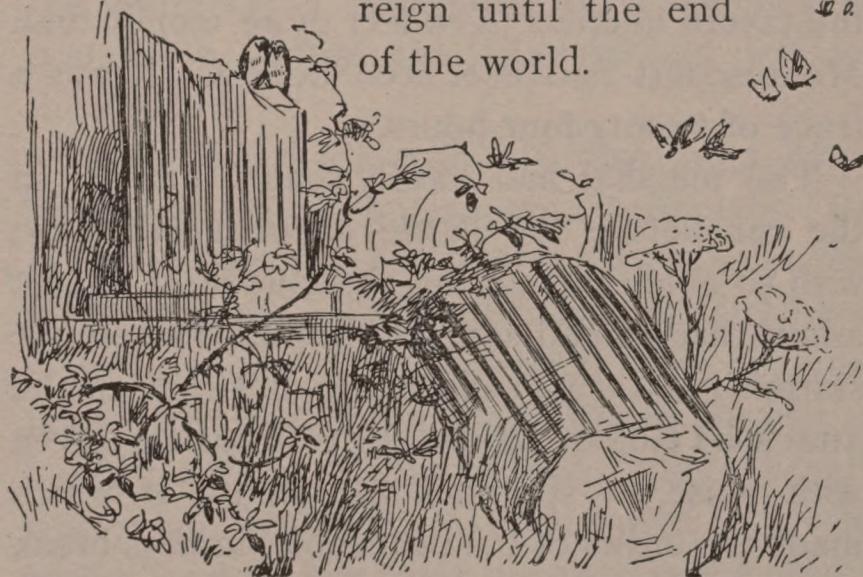
"I take you at your word," said she. "Will you look and see if my brother is nearly ready? I am sure my mother will be uneasy. She never will go to sleep without kissing me."

At that instant Raoul's voice was heard calling through the open windows. He was already in the seat, the reins in his hands; Gaston conducted the young lady to the carriage, seated her upon the cushions, covering her with shawls and cloak.

"Thanks," said she; "you have wrapped me up so well that I cannot give you my hand."

She was marvellously pretty, with an exquisite charm, her head covered with a white fluffy hood. Reygnac bent over and seizing, in place of Sabine's hand, a ribbon which floated from her garments, pressed it to his lips, and the restless horses dashed away. This was the last episode connected with the presidential tour to Montescourt. Kingdoms and republics die out, but love will

reign until the end
of the world.



CHAPTER XV.

THE president had not succeeded in satisfying either party. One side considered him as an enemy; the other as an insufficient or dangerous ally; others as a stubborn servant. Nevertheless, with a common accord, they suspended hostilities in his presence, not from any patriotic sentiment or respect, but to allow the tavern keepers to collect more money than Montescourt had ever seen before. It was a truce of twenty-four hours.

The marshal had hardly seated himself in the car, before the battle commenced anew, with so much more ardor that one must almost admit that he had assisted that day in a simple skirmish. Magalas and his friends opened the attack by violent articles, by resignations given with noise, by speeches the report of which made the brows of the peaceable farmers break out in cold perspiration. On the opposite side, they replied by a full release of all revocations.

The electoral tours of the candidates took the fierce aspect of an American duel, with this difference, that they manœuvred upon the battle-field in such a way that they never met, because they were afraid, said the sceptics, that they could not look at each other without laughing.

Already it had come to the point of their passing the nights in their carriages—executing, in imitation of great leaders, forced marches in the middle of the night, combining artifice and deceit, dropping down at six o'clock in the morning in the midst of a defenceless population before the laborers had left for their fields.

Then they made profound discourses, often incomprehensible but always interminable, for in the village the one who speaks the longest is the one who speaks the best. Nevertheless, in spite of the urgency of their work, they listened religiously with open mouths for entire hours. In our lovely France those villagers who would leave the death bed of a father to save a load of hay from the rain, would lose a whole day to listen to political gabble.

All at once Loidreau's position seemed to

be impregnable. He had many advantages over Magalas. He was rich, or at least knew where to get money. He had at his command one of the Paris journals which sustained him with many a well-written article. He was not, like the ex-veterinary, obliged to attend to everything himself, to making visits, to writing or printing, and he had the best horses.

If one adds to all this that he proudly proclaimed himself the marshal's candidate, and that the aristocrats of the place, few in number, it is true, rallied about him—at least, if we are to believe appearances—one can see that his success was looked upon as certain.

As to Reygnac, he drew aloof from the contest, considering that they could do without him. It was not that he dreaded the work or the noise, but his thoroughbred instinct disliked the mob and the humbug. He had been obliged to drive ten leagues in a car and to pass an entire night in his office to straighten out some matter, or to reconcile the Municipal Council, but he disliked these political contests where it was necessary to wet his lips with a dozen glasses and shake fifty hands “wet with

perspiration" as Shakespeare says, through the mouth of one of his boldest translators.

A short time after the marshal's visit, Gaston went to Saint Pardoult, there, at least, he was sure that they would not talk of the elections.

"Well," said he to the doctor, "you sent for me and here I am. How is your patient?"

"Better physically, monsieur; but as to the rest, she is more confused than ever. She has always the fixed idea of a criminal process to endure; but now she believes that she is in prison and on the eve of going before the assizes. The poor lady thinks that you are her lawyer, and is in despair because your visits are so rare."

"Poor creature! I will try to calm her. Let us go to her."

A moment later Reygnac found himself face to face with Madame Loidreau.

"At last! the secret is at an end!" exclaimed she, "they permit me to communicate with my counsel." Then when they were alone this poor creature said:

"My friend, you will never get me out of this. The guilty one hung himself in prison. My best means of defence has escaped me,"

"We will find another; rest easy. Every day juries acquit mothers who have killed their children. Meanwhile, are you sure that your son is not living? The other day I was shown a beautiful child three years old, who was perfectly well, I assure you, and resembled you in every feature. Would it not give you pleasure to see your son?"

"My son! but, monsieur, I have no son. I never had a son. The accursed man hung himself; that is what is serious; I, too, wished to hang myself, but I am always prevented, and then, too, God forbids us to take our own lives."

"Who was he, this bad man?" asked Reygnac, struck with this persistent idea of the crazy woman's.

She heard the question, but already her mind wandered elsewhere, and her dry lips murmured absent-mindedly:

"Monsieur, have you noticed my daughter's teeth? Never tell her they are beautiful, you will make her cry. Ah! horrible! horrible! horrible!"

Reygnac arose discouraged. Decidedly, he must renounce the idea of drawing one spark of intelligence from her poor brain. Now,

with head bent upon her knees, Mme. Loidreau made a movement as if rocking a baby, while two large tears coursed down her cheeks. And they wished him to marry this crazy creature's daughter! He went out after calling an attendant, without the sick woman's noticing anything.

"It is complete confusion," said he to the doctor, "she could not follow two minutes at a time the same idea, and I admit to you, the sight makes me ill."

As he opened the door he said, "What an inheritance she leaves for ner poor children!"

"Oh!" said the doctor, "one must make a distinction. The young girl is as healthy in intelligence as you or I, for her mother's insanity is without doubt accidental."

"Doctor," asked Gaston, "if you had a son would you allow him to marry Mademoiselle Loidreau?"

"Yes, certainly, sooner twice than once as the saying goes; but," added the doctor, with a hearty laugh, "I have only daughters, and when the little boy is old enough to take a wife, the question will not interest these young ladies."

CHAPTER XVI.

INTIMATE relations had been established between the countess and Henriette since the famous trip. The natural instincts of Henriette were developed by the contact of life in an aristocratic boarding school, and prompted her toward all which was noble, distinguished, and delicate, and these instincts continually clashing by the contact of every-day life at Fresnau, were carefully humored by Madame Reygnac, as a precious and sure ally.

Henriette had kept up the habit of coming frequently to pass the afternoon at the sous-préfecture with Gaston's mother. During these interviews the door was closed and the conversation drifted easily toward one invariable end. She did not come from a serene sphere, elegant, brought up above the common-place ideas of the country, the miseries of politics and the troubles of household cares. Nobody hearing them talk would have suspected that

there was any difference between them except in their ages, they appeared of the same society. No clue would indicate to the clearest sighted that one was the daughter of a mason, the other a real countess whose silver plate might be in the pawnbroker's, but whose coat of arms was at Versailles.

Under the pretext that her sight was weak, Madame Reygnac had made Henriette her secretary. One might often hear her say to the young girl, with her drawling voice like the old aristocrats:

“ My dear, you who are only twenty and have your young eyes, write to the duchess that I cannot come to pay her a visit this autumn as she wishes.”

Or again—

“ Darling, if it will not tire you too much will you read this letter for me; the handwriting of this poor marquis is almost illegible.

At the end of fifteen days Henriette knew the dowager's acquaintances almost as well as her own; I speak of her friends in the fashionable world, for certain less aristocratic letters, by the signature and the contents, did not meet (for a good reason) the eyes of the

young heiress—Henriette did not need to ask for the addresses; she remembered wonderfully well in the confusion of alliances, the names of the estates of the eldest sons. She knew to her fingers' ends the tastes and follies of all these society people. She had not been brought up in the Seraglio, but she knew all its ways and felt herself ready to enter it, so much so, that had she married a bourgeois, she would have believed with perfect faith she had made a misalliance.

One day, in the first lines of a letter, written in a coarse hand which savored of the eighteenth century, Madame de Reygnac stopped the young reader.

“ My child, you fall into the midst of a conspiracy, and if the person who wrote me knew —but you are one of us, and I trust you. Read then, my dear, but afterward perfect silence, is it not? Meanwhile, be warned, if I go to prison, you will go with me! ”

To prison! I believe that Henriette would willingly have gone there in such good company!

Madame de Reygnac did not deceive when she said that she conspired, but she took good

care not to say for whose benefit. One could almost believe that her correspondent wrote under her dictation. The letter arrived just in time to advance the affairs of this suitor *in partibus*, who, like certain others, would have the deed done even if compelled by force.

In spite of the preliminary advice of the countess, Henriette found more gossip than conspiracy in the four pages that were betrayed to her so freely. The last paragraph interested her the most; it was like this:

“One is half pleased at F——”

“F—— means Frohsdorf,” exclaimed Gaston’s mother.

“I know it, dear madame,” said Henriette coldly.

“One is half pleased at F—— to see a Reynac run after a sous préfecture. It is certain it is not his place, but please God he will not remain there long. For the time being, dear friend, busy yourself in finding for this charmingly bad subject, converted they say, a wife who is suitable for him. In ten years you would not be disappointed to be the mother of an ambassador. That is what is possible for your son, and one could ask for nothing

better than to put him in the saddle. I shall be in Paris toward the end of the autumn, and you can imagine with what pleasure I shall take it upon myself to present your daughter-in-law. Try only that she may be intelligent and handsome enough to grace the salon of a diplomat."

"Yes," sighed the countess; "marry your son is very easy to say! but Gaston is like an untamed colt, the moment that he is shown a saddle and bridle, he gallops away."

The truth was, that Gaston for some time had ridden a great deal under the pretext of elections. "All roads lead to Rome," says the proverb, but with him, it was the contrary, and Rome, that is to say, the Chateau de Barjols, was on the road to the four principal parts of the country.

One saw him constantly passing there, by accident, to go in a very different direction. On the other hand, it was seldom that Henriette Loidreau had an opportunity of seeing him during her long visits at Montescourt. Once or twice he had happened to come in, in the midst of a tête-à tête between the young lady and his mother. He greeted her then

coldly, seated himself for five minutes, making a few common-place remarks without looking at the pretty visitor.

Gaston's attitude was something strange and inexplicable, but one could count upon Madame de Reygnac's explaining all for the best. One thing was certain, that was, that her son was far from treating Henriette with that courteous friendship that he did five or six weeks before. Positively he seemed to fly from her with a strange persistency, and the astonishing thing was, that the countess did nothing to bring about more frequent interviews between them. It was because she knew a woman's heart well, and the old proverb, "Follow love and it will flee, flee love and it will follow thee."

One day Mlle. Loidreau could not help saying:

"Is Monsieur de Reygnac always sous-préfet de Montescourt?"

"Always," replied the countess smiling. "The fact is, neither you nor I can expect but little. The poor boy has no time to loiter. He takes his work seriously and works as if his life depended upon it."

"But," said Henriette, selecting with much care a bit of wool from a basket, "I thought that he ought to be diplomatic."

"Diplomatic," said the countess shaking her head; "he does not show much disposition for diplomacy. Admit that you think the same."

Mlle. Loidreau did not reply. During her next visit she returned to the same subject.

"He seems to me preoccupied and sad," said Madame de Reygnac sighing; "he pretends the elections absorb his time. He spends the mornings in his office and the afternoons going about the parishes."

"About the parish of Barjols," said Henriette, who knew through her uncle all the news in the district.

The countess became interested. Her son never spoke to her of Sabine or her family. Meanwhile if he went to Barjols it was not to inspect the primary school. She replied without seeming in the least surprised, "The marquis is his most intimate friend."

"And what a charming person Sabine is," said Henriette with an indifferent air.

"Charming," said the countess; "and her mother is the best of women. At Barjols poor

Gaston can forget politics—become a society man and speak without turning every word over in his mind a dozen times."

Henriette had a piqued air, looked at the tip of her



boots which gave some signs of impatience and said, "You are hard upon Fresnau, madame. I assure you that my uncle and my aunt——"

"Oh! my dearest, they are perfection. But with your uncle one can talk of little but politics, and your aunt—come now, my

child, you know she is very little a woman of the world, and horribly countrified."

Henriette knew it only too well, but if she had spoken all her thoughts she would have said:

"Yes; but I have understood that she has a niece who, in spite of her name, is not countrified."

Madame de Reygnac had a keen perception and knew very well people's thoughts. She continued, "It is a terrible position in the country, for a young man without a fortune to marry. People look for a reason in every thing he does. Mlle. de Barjols is not rich enough for people to marry her to Gaston at the second visit."

His second visit! It was a long time ago that the third was made, and the fourth too! The very next day after the party Reygnac went to make inquiries. Not to have done so would have been impolite. Thank God! the mended pole had held good and the return home was accomplished without accident, although they had almost run over a dozen drunken men reeling from one side of the street to the other shouting "La Marsellaise"

to the moonlight for want of a better audience. However, politeness did not go quite so far as to speak of a certain red ribbon kissed the night before, and Sabine, on her side, appeared at first a little reserved, but Gaston made the marquise laugh until the tears rolled down her cheeks, when telling her of the exploits of the guests of Montescourt, and by the end of five minutes Sabine was laughing with her mother.

Two days after, the préfecture had replied on the subject of the fire engine. They sent a set of questions, twenty-seven in number, not one less. It required two hours to do the work, and Gaston had time to count the dimples and pretty blue veins on the hand that was writing. It was the hand that he looked at; it was the cheeks that became red. What could he do? There is nothing which prevents the eyes following a pen which travels across paper. So much the worse for the fingers which hold the pen!

Before the week had passed there was another administrative question which required the presence of the sous-préfet at Barjols. What an engrossing parish! Happily the others did not resemble it,

Finally, Gaston went without pretext, simply for exercise, to take the air. He took the cars at Montescourt, leaving the train at the first station and walked the distance between the station and chateau. There in the large drawing-room, always full of delicious freshness or under a large tree a little way from the chateau, he would find the mother and daughter busy at their everlasting work of knitting for the poor, and linen for the church.

At first the marquise was not able to shake off in Gaston's presence that distrust which 1830 inspired in a certain society regarding all that was official. But this young man still belonged to her set. He was so independent! In politics he would offend sooner by not having opinions than to have bad ones. In religion he had principles, a little broad it is true, but at best he knew how to defend them--as a gentleman would defend a woman who is not his friend, for the reason that she was attacked. Still, he had the same frankness, and a person like the marquise could not maintain her reserve long toward a man, loyal, generous, and well educated. Soon they became the best friends in the world,

As to Sabine, if you had asked her what she thought of Reygnac, she would have been a little embarrassed. Meanwhile the less acute would have said that she did not feel any antipathy for him, otherwise she would have found a hundred good reasons for not being riveted to her chair, as she was, during the visits that Gaston made to the marquise. On these occasions, if any affair called Mlle. de Barjols out of the drawing-room, it was to be noticed that the business was promptly attended to and that her chair did not remain empty long. By the end of the month, Sabine, without realizing it, spent some time longer dressing her hair on the days when she might expect a visit from Reygnac. Soon she found that the days when he did not come, went less quickly than the others.

As for Gaston, he was contented as usual to turn the pages of his life, without looking to see the title of the next chapter. He was one of those who emptied the bottle when the wine was good, taking care not to count the glasses; and who did not waken himself in the night expressly to ask, "Have I slept?"

He knew very well that one came quickly

enough to the bottom of the bottle, and to the end of his dreams. Poor wine does not seem better the next day, because one has abstained from drinking good wine the night before. Soon enough, the time will come when it will be necessary to bid adieu to the sweet strong wine that he prefers. Meanwhile, a few hours of intoxication enjoyed from time to time does no harm to anybody.

The marquise commenced to sing the praises of Reygnac loudly, but when he had gone, she sung them in this fashion:

“He is a charming man, remarkably well-bred and thoughtful. What a pity that his thoughtfulness should come so slowly and his money go so fast. People say that he will marry this little Loidreau, and truly, he will not do such a very bad thing.”

“Take that, Sabine!” thought Raoul smiling under his moustache. “This is to caution you against any romantic ideas. Our mother is a woman of precaution. She does not close the door on passers by, but she searches them before they enter, to see what they have in their pockets.”

Sabine understood very well, although she

looked perfectly innocent; one day she blushed a little because her brother, after a new insinuation of the marquise, replied:

“Upon my honor, mother, if our friend Reygnac wishes to marry the Loidreau, he takes a queer way of paying her attention.”

Mlle. Barjols thought that her brother was not wanting in logic on this occasion, and that evening when the family separated, she gave her brother what he called a “Sunday kiss.”

CHAPTER XVII.

AT last, autumn came; the time for the legislative elections. That famous date October 14th was not far away. While in the cities certain political events, more or less pronounced, showed themselves in the breast of the people, the rural element became the prey of complete bewilderment, which was daily increasing and likely to reach that of profound terror.

There was occasion for it! Every morning the postman, transformed into a street porter, flooded the country with a multitude of various journals, but equally full of terrible predictions.

Here they announced the return of the tithes, forced confessions, war, and Prussian invasion. There—scourges from heaven, and those of the revolution, frost, hail, fire, and the guillotine. The countryman between two fires truthfully could say when he had read this mourn-

ful prose, "All this is only a question of my death!"

Still, if it was only a question of dying! but the house! the poor house whose walls yet showed in places the dark traces of the winter of 1870. The incendiary lies in wait for the tiles of the roofs still new, and the bundles of wheat but just carried to the granary. For if there is one thing the farmers fear in this world, it is fire. The last war has demonstrated this. In many instances he will excuse an assassin; but try to ask his pity for an incendiary!

Therefore every morning faces became more solemn. From day to day the dismayed voter fell back more and more toward the last resource of the farmer, concealment, deceit and caution. He was reserved with his wife, deceived his neighbor and above all his candidate, promising his vote to everybody, drinking with the same placid smile Magalas' beer, and Loidreau's poor wine, filling his pockets with circulars that were given him by the handful, and destroying them behind some thicket in a deserted place, where nobody could see him.

Now and then in coming out of a reunion,

he carried to his home a wan smile, a vague hope opened under the abundant shower of pompous promises. Alas! the next day would prove to him that the promises were impossible to keep, and that he, the poor voter, was only a fool, in short, this was the only truth upon which he had no doubt.

Reygnac rarely saw "his candidate," who spent his days at reunions and the greater part of his nights in his carriage. The old justice of peace, formerly very corpulent, became thin like a greyhound. The most astonishing thing was that he had become an orator. Sometimes it was necessary that he should speak for three hours, in order to occupy the time until dinner, without which, a lawyer belonging to the adverse party would be able to have the platform. At other times he had to despatch in ten minutes an entire political programme. Above all, it was necessary to be ready to reply without evasion to the most difficult questions asked suddenly by one of Magalas' friends. But with practice we attain success. If they questioned him upon the constitution, the army, upon alliances, protection or free trade, he had for each a system

unassailable, but equally incomprehensible to his auditors. He replied; that was the essential thing.

One day while exhausted horses were being changed, they being simply the candidates' horses, and not the candidates themselves—Loidreau came to rest for ten minutes in an arm chair in Reygnac's office.

"Oh!" said he, making the springs creak. "What a business! if ever I am caught again!"

"How do your affairs progress?"

"How does the devil progress? Can you know what is going on with him? Oh! these electors! they turn into pickpockets. Yesterday I lent twenty francs to one of them who came to cry poverty at my office. This morning I found my twenty francs upon the subscription list of the Magalas Club under the name of my borrower."

"A transfer, that is all! When they remember that in one of your last speeches you called these good farmers, 'Soldiers of honor, all ready to defend the fortress of duty!'"

"One would think that the man with the twenty francs served in the cavalry. What

would you ? The metaphor is not mine. It is Perrin's. That fellow is very clever."

"He forced his imagination a little too far."

"Yes, but what a valuable man ! He works day and night. If you could see what he calls his electoral nest of drawers. As many drawers as parishes and in them a collection of autographs that makes one tremble. For Perrin pretends that he has in this little piece of furniture what will break Magalas' election, or mine, as he chooses."

"The devil! if I were in your place, the key of this 'little piece of furniture' would never leave my pocket."

"Oh! my dear fellow, you are hard on this poor Perrin. What could he do without me?"

The time has come to tell what Perrin would do without his patron, but first a short biography of this fellow is necessary.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT the death of the deputy Loidreau, first of the name, who died suddenly as we know, his brother Justin, the dismissed justice of peace, a lawyer of little reputation, devoted for the rest of his life—according to all appearances—to pleading for small fees, felt suddenly a heavy weight tumble on his shoulders. Suddenly he was invested with the legislative order to be guardian for a young girl and an infant, to say nothing of a crazy sister-in-law, and the administration of a large fortune in real estate and securities.

Ill prepared by the humbleness of his former life for so heavy a task, he needed an assistant and had to choose him quickly.

An insignificant deputy receives twenty-five letters a day written by solicitors of varied ambition. One needed money; another, more patient, generally, wanted the moon; but to these, as well as the others, the deputy must make some reply within twenty-four hours.

Loidreau knew the country people well by having pronounced sentence upon them during a greater part of his life. He knew what a satisfaction it would be to their vanity to find on their smoky tables, upon returning home, a letter bearing their address and the signature of a great person. On the very next day after his appointment the newly-chosen deputy was flooded with communications, which led to the necessity of a secretary. Thank God! they were not rare. One of the heads of his party recommended Jules Perrin, "One of us, my friend, with a future before him."

Loidreau became convinced later that Perrin had a "future." He ascertained that same day that he could talk well and was young. I have known recommendations not so well verified.

Besides his diploma and his youth, Perrin had remarkable intelligence, and also he was as sedate as a Parisian of twenty-six could be, who had early in life a knowledge of fasting, and has sworn to himself to become acquainted, sooner or later, with indigestion. This vow Jules had tried to keep too soon, at the time when he made a journey into Egypt three or

four years before. He accompanied into Pharaoh's country a political person who had been as lucky in money as certain actresses are in intrigue, because the two professions help each other to succeed.

Perrin's salary was more limited than his duties. Warned in advance that he would have all the work to do, he accepted it quietly, according to circumstances—escorting his master as secretary or following him as valet. He copied reports in the morning, and in the evening packed trunks. One day the two travellers parted suddenly. Had Jules abused the contents of the reports or the trunks? That was one thing never well known. One thing was sure, the financier made no fuss; without doubt he had some backslidings resting heavily on his conscience and feared that his companion did not add to his other accomplishments the art of holding his tongue. Jules reappeared upon the boulevard with a smiling air, a decorated fob, his pocket-book full of testimonials, a rosette in his button-hole; in short as good for nothing as before.

Fortunately for him, this young man had some great talents, eyes like a lynx, ears like

an Apache, the scruples of a Robert Macaire, but above all a wonderful memory. When he was presented to Mlle. Loidreau he asked himself the next moment: "Where have I seen that face?" Suddenly he remembered. It was at Cairo, three years before; only then Mlle. Loidreau was called Mme. Durand; she went out very little, lived with an aged person —her mother without doubt—in an old house at Cairo, and saw nobody. What had become of the mother? She was most likely dead.

As to the motive of this journey Perrin thought he had divined it, and that evening when he retired he felt he had done a good day's work.

As he was not a gossip, he said nothing, and kept it secret that he had ever been beyond Marseilles, his expedition into Egypt not being, for certain reasons, one of those souvenirs that one cares to leave his descendants. In making himself indispensable to the uncle, he studied the ground over and tried to make himself agreeable to the niece. He was a good-looking fellow in spite of his treacherous eye, which never looked one in the face. He dressed well and waltzed gracefully. At the

end of six months Henriette thought she discovered that he was in love with her, and this discovery amused her, though it was not easy to amuse this melancholy beauty, but there are so few recreations in the country! Perrin was a boarder in the family at Fresnau, and was there five months of the year, at least.

This interesting young man said nothing of his sentiments. Henriette could not look at him without thinking of the earthworm in love with a star, in which she deceived herself.

This worm had very good eyes, and when he turned them by stealth upon his patron's niece, he had the sneaking air of a school-boy who looks at an apple waiting for it to fall. The apple fell. One evening in October, 1876, at Fresnau, as they were finishing dinner, according to custom the mail was brought in, the deputy sadly took his fifteen or twenty letters, his wife took the story in *La Patrie* and their niece opened the *Figaro*. Perrin, who had nothing to do, looked at them, with the tranquil air of a well-fed cat seated in front of a pigeon house.

Suddenly Henriette became very pale, left

her seat and tottering to the door disappeared without anybody's taking notice of her but the watchful secretary. He, with a step like a deer went out in his turn through a glass door, turned a corner of the house and drawing near an open window, saw all that passed in the drawing-room. Mlle. Loidreau was stretched upon the floor unconscious, the *Figaro* by her side; Perrin climbed into the window put the paper into his pocket, and—an astonishing thing for one so much in love—seemed to pay no attention to the beautiful girl lying at his feet in a cloud of lace. All that he took the trouble to do, was to press hurriedly two or three times an electric bell, then he went away as quickly as he came, and was soon out of doors.

The servants ran, and finding their young mistress insensible, they thought that she had had time to call them before fainting. They used every exertion and made her come to herself so quickly, that the doctor, who was sent for in great haste, found his patient in the avenue.

Although a little paler than usual, she had a cheerful face and her eyes burned with a strange excitement. The doctor, who prided

himself on being gallant to ladies and a connoisseur of painting, said to her:

"It is nothing, I do not even need to feel of your pulse! Alas! that I am not a great painter! With that face, I would make such a Judith as never was painted before."

"Truly!" said she with a proud vivacity. "Hold, I will take the position, the trunk of this tree is the body of Holophernes."

With arms crossed, the head and shoulders thrown back, the face filled with a cloud of disgust and hate, a flash of triumph in her eyes, she trampled under her feet the dead body of her enemy.

"He is dead! dead! dead!" she repeated with firmly closed lips.

"Henriette! I beg of you! you make me afraid," said her aunt.

"My dear niece," said the deputy, "try and strike this attitude next winter; you will make a success of tableau vivant. Now, doctor, what news about the elections?"

During this time Perrin, shut up in his room, studied the *Figaro* with as much care as a police officer would search a field to find a corpse,

Two days later, Loidreau sent his secretary to Saint Pardoult to pay his sister-in-law's bills. Jules did not take the trip for the first time. Already he had arranged to see the insane woman, and recognized at first sight the lady he saw at Cairo, but he had tried in vain to make her say one word. This day he asked Dr. Donoil:

"Any news as to the invalid's condition?"

"Nothing, save a bad attack day before yesterday."

"Day before yesterday! What caused it?"

"Nothing known; Madame Loidreau was reading her paper, when she was seized with an excitement, and it was with great trouble that she was calmed. Since then she has not been as well as usual."

"Did you examine the paper?"

"From beginning to end, without finding anything to explain this crisis."

"Did you keep it?"

"They had to return it to her, willing or not, but I took note of the date and the title."

One more question convinced Perrin that the journal in question was the same one which caused Henriette to faint.

"Now," said he, when he was alone, "the time has come to make the first stroke."

Sweet young man! his strokes were equal to dynamite bombs.

The next day, after his visit to the asylum, about nine o'clock in the morning, he was working alone in his employer's office. It was a cool day and a light fire burned in the fire-place.

Henriette entered with a preoccupied air, and after having returned absent-mindedly the profound salute of her uncle's secretary, she placed her feet before the fire, glancing about the room at the same time as if looking for something.

Perrin continued his work without speaking.

"I am looking for the day before yesterday's *Figaro*," said the young girl. "Have you seen it?"

Jules laid down his pen; the time to make his stroke had come.

"Without doubt," said he, "you refer to the number containing an account of the suicide."

He spoke in a low thrilling voice like a caress, and Mlle. Loidreau fell, rather than sat, into the arm chair placed near the fire-

place, for she felt her limbs tremble beneath her.

"What account? What suicide?" said she, trying to reply. "I do not understand you."

"Allow me," said Perrin lowering his eyes, "not to enter into particulars. It is about the dentist who made his patients insensible; you know, very well. This wretch has for several years committed these monstrous crimes which his victims dare not complain of, although many of them had to leave their own country to conceal the results.

"The other day, however, a young girl exposed him; the dentist was arrested at once and put in prison. The next day he was found hung in his cell. What a horrible drama!"

At these words Perrin arose and took a key from his pocket, opened "the little piece of furniture" and took from it a paper carefully tied, and handed it to Henriette.

"Here it is," said he bowing. "I had no doubt that you wished to guard this document, and for that reason I put it away."

Henriette did not move her eyes, or extend her hand toward the young man who was speaking to her. At this moment, nobody

would have thought of comparing her to Judith trampling under foot the body of Holophernes. From her white lips came these



words spoken with difficulty.

“What do you mean, monsieur? I do not like enigmas.”

“No more do I,” replied the young bandit; “although when I meet them, I do not rest until I puzzle them out. In entering this

house, chance proposed a very puzzling one to me; judge for yourself. At Cairo, where I lived some time ago, I came across, several times, a young French girl—too beautiful to pass without notice no matter where. She called herself, or others did, Madame Durand. Admit that I had reason to be surprised in meeting her again a little later, and discovering that she was not ‘madame’ but ‘demoiselle,’ with a different name. Meanwhile she had taken, not only the name of a young girl, but also a slender, light form. It was a puzzle, was it not? I tried for a long time to find the right answer; it is needless to say that I had the discretion to investigate for myself alone.” Perrin stopped as if to give time for two large tears to roll down Henriette’s cheeks; tears of shame, also of anger.

“Thus,” thought she, “the monster who ruined me, does so again by his death. Alas! I rejoiced too soon, or I committed a crime; I too, in rejoicing over the death of a human being, after having wished it for a long time. Unhappy creature that I am! I am revenged, not saved. I am not free. The horrible secret is not buried in the grave. Why was it

not this one who hung himself? The other, I had a thousand times less to fear."

Perrin was not a man to lose the thread of his ideas by seeing a woman cry. He continued in the same soothing tone.

"The answer to the enigma was in this paper. Two women have read a certain paragraph of twenty lines. One of these women—the younger—fainted away, the other—please remember that I went yesterday to Saint Pardoult—the other's disease has become dangerously aggravated. You must admit that these occurrences are worth all the explanations in the world. What appears to me without doubt is, that all is ended for the best. A scamp has taken the law into his own hands, and between us, I prefer to know him to be in hell, rather than in prison, where he would not have been sent without a famous trial, and who knows what might have been known, what names spoken. I repeat it, all has ended well for you, for your —— brother, and for me."

"For you?" murmured the young girl raising her head.

"Certainly, you would not be a woman if you had not discovered in me the feelings

which you have inspired; yesterday I admired you in silence, to-day, as yesterday, my life belongs to you. It belongs to you all the more, as in disappearing, this miserable scoundrel took with him the greatest obstacle which a gentleman of honor—— ”

Henriette arose, and went toward the door without hearing more. But in passing the table where Perrin sat in his leather arm chair she said this single word: “ Villain! ”

Then she went out, to her room, and when alone with herself, her pride left her and once more the tears came into her eyes.

Thus this frightful journey had been useless! At the end of an hour her energetic nature asserted itself.

“ After all,” thought she, “ there are no proofs; the records of the French Consul at Cairo show nothing, and then, who would ever believe this miserable fellow? Meanwhile there will always be time to do as the other one did.”

She continued her ordinary life, and nobody would have imagined the anguish that tortured her soul. The end of the parliamentary vacations caused everybody to return to Paris,

where she was one of the most admired of the belles.

Again in the spring of 1877, Fresnau opened its doors to the family. Once more, Perrin and Henriette found themselves side by side, living the same life, seated at the same table, without either of them beginning the struggle the second time.

Several suitors were presented to the heiress, but she refused them all with unconquerable distaste. She believed she should find in each something infamous, like her uncle's secretary; as the sick person who is nauseated, believes she tastes in each new dish the flavor of the one which caused her nausea. That was the reason why she revolted at the first suspicion of Reygnac's intentions toward herself.

Perrin, on his side, believed he would be victorious, but knew Henriette and suspected that the last events in the drama would be lively. Patient in his calculations, untiring in his vigilance, he waited, following his prey with his dull eyes, thinking that weariness sooner or later would make her succumb.

CHAPTER XIX.

ONE can judge with what eagerness the unhappy girl escaped from Fresnau to rejoin the Countess de Reygnac at Montescourt.

When she was away from the place haunted by Perrin, she seemed to breathe freer. Meanwhile with an end in view—as we know—Gaston's mother increased with all her power this feeling of relief, by carrying constantly this young girl into a world where there were only questions of honor, noble sentiments, and generous devotion. These frequent visits could not escape the notice of Perrin, who had good reasons to consider them suspicious, and to arrange it, as we have seen, to watch them more or less. Meanwhile he was not the only one troubled about the intimacy between the two women. Everybody talked of it, and very naturally too. It was to Perrin himself, as a guest in the house, that the curious ones addressed their questions to find out the news.

Let us add, that Loidreau's secretary had no opportunity to sing his madrigals to Henriette, that is to say, to force her to surrender. The young girl never put her foot inside her uncle's office, neither walked in the park, days when she feared some unfortunate meeting. Writing was invented to take the place of speech. One morning Henriette found amongst her mail the following love letter:

“ Mademoiselle, I am as patient in my waiting as I am ardent in my hope. Meanwhile you will be wrong to believe me a fool. Like the hero in a very beautiful tragedy, I am prepared to conquer you, to make war with kings or gods. But tragedy has never been to my taste, and is not to yours I think. That is why I appeal to you in simple writing, humbly as it belongs to my own unworthiness. Do not forget, that chance—allow me to bless it—seems to have united our destinies. Do you also remember that one never escapes the decrees of fate ? Those who have attempted it, always have had good reason to repent it. Sooner or later it must be that the dawn of my happiness will break. I await that day at your feet.”

The author of this charming letter signed his full name, like a man sure of himself. If Perrin could have seen Henriette's eyes, while she fastened her nails, with a sort of rage, upon the sheet of paper which brought her this cynical ultimatum, he would have understood that his marriage was not yet a sure thing and would have discovered, at least, that these threatening allusions had not produced any great effect upon the young girl, for, that same day, she took a carriage and drove to Montescourt, accompanied, as usual, by her maid.

All that afternoon Reygnac's ears ought to have tingled, for his mother and Henriette talked almost entirely of him. It was, as one may imagine, a very agreeable subject for the countess, and one upon which she willingly expatiated. She told, or rather retold, Gaston's life from the time he had the measles when six years of age, to his wound during the war.

She enumerated the prizes that he had obtained when in college, and was indiscreet enough to tell of successes of another kind which had distinguished him later in life. She told of his duels and pretended to grieve over

them. In brief she sketched a portrait apparently not very flattering, but having in reality all that was necessary to turn the head, and make the heart of a young girl of twenty throb. In some respects, Henriette's head and heart were as aged as one of sixty. A youthful mind, like the colors in a butterfly, cannot resist a storm. But the more the unhappy girl saw opening under her feet the abyss at the bottom of which an abject being waited for his prey, the more she listened with charmed and open ears to these recitations, where there was only a question of passionate impulses—often blind, but always generous, adventurous freaks, chivalrous extravagances. In the eyes of this Andromeda, fettered to a real fatality, Reygnac appeared like Perseus, victorious and a saviour. He was to her the veritable hero of the fable, not so much a god as a man to be loved, but yet more than a man.

Seeing her brilliant eyes, her heaving chest, and her earnest face, Madame Reygnac made a mistake and thought that Henriette loved her son. One easily believes what one wishes. This mother, eager to assure happiness to her son, and her own at the same time, thought

she saw opening before her the door to success. She redoubled her eloquence, became more clear in her hints. Finally, believing that the time had arrived to make her grand stroke, with eyes full of tears, torn by maternal passion, she ended by saying that "She would die blessing God if before she left the world she could call Henriette her daughter."

Tearful as she was, the dowager was none the less discerning, and what she saw now astonished her, for she read, or at least thought she read, in the girl's face, the bewildered look of a shepherdess to whom one speaks of marrying a prince.

"Really," thought Madame de Reygnac, "does this young girl love my son as much as this!"

Then calling up all her cleverness she said aloud, "I beg your pardon, my dear child, for giving you the tiresome sight of seeing an old lady cry. What can I do? One can dream at any age. God knows, that the dreams of my girlhood were not fulfilled, I feel that it will be even so with this one of my old age. My poor Gaston is not worthy of you!"

Henriette sighed and turned her head. She

knew well, poor girl, which one was unworthy of the other. It was all she could do to keep from saying so to Madame de Reygnac.

"O madame," replied she with a touching inflection of the voice, "do not say that!"

"Certainly," replied the countess, continuing her march onward, "my son is unworthy of nobody. But after the language of the world, the difference in fortune is the barrier, the most impassable that can be raised between you two."

"No," replied Henriette, "I know of more difficult ones to break through. You do not know all, madame. Believe me, do not ever speak to me again of that which is impossible."

"It will not be impossible if you love my son."

"For heaven's sake," said Henriette, "do not insist. You do not suspect how much you make me suffer, of all that you bring up of the past. I began to suffer very young. Meanwhile, do not have this idea, that I refuse your son, or that his being poor has anything to do with it. If I could be his wife tomorrow, I would bless God."

Then Mademoiselle Loidreau, who appeared

very much agitated, sent for her carriage and left, but not without kissing Madame de Reygnac in such a way that showed that she did not bear her any ill will.

When alone, the countess put aside all her emotions, true and false, and reflected seriously.

She certainly lacked neither judgment nor intelligence; but women lose their sharpness of judgment when the object concerned is a thing ardently longed for. They then confound their desires with good sense and throw all, pell-mell, into the same side of the balance.

Of these reflections, connected with the recollection of what her son had said to her before, Madame de Reygnac drew the following conclusions: "Henriette loved Gaston. She believed herself separated from him forever on account of the words spoken in pride on a certain evening by the young man. Also, according to all probability, some little love affair that she had had in society was on her conscience."

Summed up, the marriage was from this time on merely child's play, since Gaston's rôle was to not say "No," when asked to say

"Yes;" a thing which he had solemnly promised to carry out.

As to the little offences of the intended bride—her future mother-in-law would undertake to confess her and absolve her. The penitent seemed so contrite! Meanwhile, had she not in her pocket what would pay for the indulgences? The essential thing was, to change as soon as possible all these grand sentences and beautiful scruples on both sides, into a fair and good engagement; and without loss of time the countess went to Reygnac's office to make the last attack. She felt so puffed up with pride at her success that, thin and spare as she was, the door seemed to her hardly wide enough to pass through. She contained herself, as she suspected that others might not join in her enthusiasm; but should she have to drag by force one of these two victims to the altar, this last battle of her life should be gained.

"You will remember," said she, when she was seated in an armchair, "of a promise you made me one day?"

"Poor mamma!" replied Gaston laying down his pen, "I have promised you so many

things in my life! I wonder that you pay any attention to them."

"Let us talk seriously. You promised to say 'Yes,' if nothing more was necessary only your consent to make you Henriette Loidreau's husband. It is for this I come to you."

"Yes; but is it possible——?"

"It is more than possible, it is done. You say 'Yes,' do you not?"

As one sees, the countess anticipated somewhat the result.

Gaston did not say "Yes." He remained silent, knit his brows and his thoughts flew to Sabine. While he buried his face in his hands without replying, his mother spoke again—

"You will be a fool, then, all your life. But this time I will not let you be lost. As to myself, think that if you refuse, I shall die. It is the hope of this last chance that has sustained me until now, not only in face of poverty, which is nothing, but in the face of debts. Ah! the debts! you laugh at them, you men; but us, they kill. Meanwhile, it is I who owe them. Nobody would lend you a sou. But there are some people who have consented to

take as security the word of an old lady, but still more, the dowry of her future daughter-in-law. If I die to-morrow these people will say that I have stolen from them! And you will be the cause of it!"

"Mother," said Gaston, "do not get so excited. At this hour we ought to be calm."

"How can I be calm when it is a question for me to know if I am to have a little rest at the close of my life? Meanwhile, do not think that I expect to gain by your fortune. Listen, Gaston, you will give me a little apartment, not too high up, on account of my old legs, which our rooms in the house-top have tired out. You will come to see me often, and there at last I shall rest. I can sleep at night without being haunted by these frightful bills. My heart will not bound then at the sound of a bell announcing a visitor, or at the sight of a handwriting, too well known, upon a letter. In the streets I shall receive no longer those kind of bows that paralyze, like a writ served by an officer. Above all, I shall be easy as to your future."

Madame de Reygnac seemed very much affected while pronouncing these words; I do

not undertake to say that she really was. As to Gaston, he did not make a motion.

"After all," said the countess, with some force, "would you then break your word, simply because it was given to your mother?"

At these words Gaston raised his head.

"I shall keep my word," said he. "Already now, I consider myself as engaged to Mlle. Loidreau. You know me. It is as if the thing was done. Only I exact that it shall remain as now, until after the elections and my resignation is sent in to the Minister. I will not have it look as if I sold my service to Loidreau: It is only a delay of one week, the hardest creditor would grant that much."

The countess had had in her life too many occasions to put them to the test, but certain remembrances made her see at this time that all would end here if this delay was not granted. And this time the difficulty was not so great. Still it was necessary to confide to the claimants the happy transformation which was to take place in Reygnac's fortunes.

It was also necessary, at the same time, to secure the means to meet the expenses of the wedding trousseau. It was in fact necessary

to take a trip to Paris, and in this state of affairs Gaston persisted in putting off the final step; the best thing was, to let matters rest for the time being. In this way Henriette's visits to Montescourt were necessarily cut off—a wise precaution. After the interviews which had taken place and which the countess considered, rightly or wrongly, as decisive, what would the young girl have thought if her fiancé, by proxy, had met her the next day and talked of the rain or beautiful weather?

Madame de Reygnac had a quick eye, a little too much so sometimes, as we have seen. She made, at once, that evening, preparations for a short absence, and wrote Henriette a note to announce her return the day before the elections:

“Without losing one hour,” said she, to her young friend, “I will come, my darling, to embrace you, to congratulate the newly elected, and to talk with you of graver matters.”

The next day Madame de Reygnac left Montescourt by the express train—this time, in a first-class compartment. As the son, standing on the steps, was pressing her hand for the last time, a servant coming on horseback

from Fresnau appeared on the platform. He saw Gaston's mother and came directly to her.

"You have a letter?" asked she.

"No, Madame la Countess, not a letter, only a bouquet."

Poor Henriette! What had she to write?

Madame de Reygnac considered that this bouquet was worth more than all the letters in the world. She would not have given it for less than five millions.

"Stop," said she, taking out one flower and putting it in the button-hole of her son's coat. "It is as well that you should have your part; she has charming tact, this little one."

"It is then true!" thought Gaston, as he watched the train moving off.

CHAPTER XX.



ASTON walked home and waited in the garden until the hour to commence work. The morning was glorious, but it was an October one. We say a beautiful autumn, as we say a beautiful old age in speaking of an octogenarian. Of all seasons, autumn is the saddest for those whom hope does not rejoice by her eternal sun.

Gaston knew that this shining orb would never break upon his life.

As he walked with a slow and listless step around his domain, he recapitulated with the clearness of thought which the calmness of the morning gave him, the situation that the future had prepared for him. It was very simple and a thing that is seen every day. He loved one, and married another. His conscience was

honest, his mind just, and good sense reigned there. So no need of grand speeches. He did not swear to himself to detest Henriette, on the contrary he did not promise even not to deceive her. He comprehended that only one woman could make him happy, which convinced him that happiness was not for him. A like discovery leads, according to one's age, to divers results. At twenty years of age, they wish to kill themselves, but they rarely do so. At twenty-five, they commit some folly; at thirty, they coolly amputate, but the operation is only the more painful. Nobody up to the present time has recovered from chloro-forming the heart.

For the moment, Gaston's first duty was to stop going to Barjols. So he decided immediately that he would go there that very day, to tell them that they would not see him there any more. Meanwhile, the elections took place in a week, and the very next day, farewell to the sous-préfecture at Montescourt. The three thousand solicitors registered at Place Beauvau would have at least one place to contend for. In the midst of all this, the clock struck eight, and Léfèvre's glasses ap-

peared upon the scene. The morning was spent in working hard, for Reygnac was a worker, and his secretary had ended by saying of him in the city:

“This young man has the making of an administrator; he has made an astonishing gain in five months.”

In the afternoon, his signatures given, the administrator became a simple mortal, little satisfied with his fate. Without making a toilette, wearing still in his coat the rose that his mother had placed there, he took the train to go to say adieu to Sabine. The marquise and her two children noticed their visitor was sad, but they thought his troubled air was caused by political preoccupation.

The conversation dragged painfully; Gaston talked a little, and of everything but the one thing he wished to say. To make amends, he thought a great deal of one of whom he had no right; he adored Sabine. As to her, she never had made more fancy work. Let the experienced draw their own conclusions.

The hour for his departure struck. Gaston arose; he was going away just as he came, not having the courage to speak. But fate

had decreed otherwise. His friend wished to go with him to the little gate at the end of the park, which was used by foot passengers.

"Will you come too, Sabine?" said Raoul to his sister.

The young girl took her straw hat and followed her brother hastily. In crossing the yard where the saddle horses were kept, Raoul said to the young people:

"Walk on, I will stop a moment to examine Romulus's feet; he was lame this morning."

Often before under the escort of this busy chaperon, Sabine and Gaston had found themselves alone for a short time.

This day, as if the tête-à-tête was an uncommon occurrence, they felt a strange embarrassment and suddenly could think of nothing to say.

To break this dangerous silence into which both were plunged, Sabine caught hold of the first branch that she saw; it was a branch of a rose tree, and had one rose on it.

"The laws of hospitality," said she picking it, "forbid my letting you leave with that faded thing in your button-hole. Here is a fresh flower for you!"



"Here is a fresh flower for you."

H. T. ASPERN, JR.

Gaston stopped suddenly and looked at Sabine. She was very pretty at this moment, with a sweet, almost tender air, whilst she presented him with the rose, the last of the season. The rose was a little pale, paler than the one who offered it, for Sabine asked herself on second thought, if it would not have been better to have held her tongue, or if the remedy was not worse than the disease. What would Count de Reygnac think? What would he reply?

Poor Sabine! for once when she risked so much, she had no luck. With a shrinking face and a voice that sounded almost hard, Gaston replied to her:

“This faded thing as you call it—with reason, ought to remain where it is, mademoiselle.”

As two beautiful eyes were turned toward him, full of sorrowful astonishment which only added to their touching beauty, too touching, alas!

“I ought to keep this flower,” added he.
“My fiancée gathered it for me.”

The fiancée in question, supposing her to be, would not have felt much flattered could

she have seen the air with which these words were spoken. He could not have said it less tenderly, had he told of receiving a dagger stroke in place of a flower.

It was as he felt really, a cruel and unexpected anguish. His sacrifice surpassed what he had anticipated, in coming to Barjols. At this moment, when he sought in vain for the words in which to say adieu to Sabine, he realized that she loved him.

How, under the sting of this misfortune had he allowed himself to make this brutal announcement, irreparable surely, of his approaching marriage with another? He could not explain it to himself. Thus—like this—a thorough-bred horse throws himself upon the naked sword he sees flashing before his breast. Gaston had promised to marry Henriette; he believed himself bound, at least he knew to what kind of a mother he had given his word. Above all, with a person like Sabine, upon the slope where they were both gliding, the least shade of dissimulation would be an unworthy insult.

Mademoiselle de Barjols, a girl too high-minded to lie, kept a good countenance. One

could hear a slight trembling in her voice when she said :

“ Ah! really ? Are you to be married ? ”

“ Yes, and I suppose that I do not need to tell you with whom. For two months there has been talk of this marriage, and you must, more than once, have heard the reports that were current.”

“ Yes, but—but my brother said they were ridiculous.”

“ The good fellow ! I have not confided my secrets to him, at all events. What I have come to tell you, is known only to my mother and you. I count upon your silence.”

In spite of her efforts to conceal what she resented, Sabine could not help asking this question, nor completely disguise her vexation.

“ I would like to know why you choose me as your confidante.” She continued to walk slowly by Gaston’s side, pulling off one by one the petals of the rose that he would not take. She thought also that it would be necessary to pluck from her heart certain thoughts, known only to herself. At least she hoped she had not betrayed herself. In the stable yard behind them, the blacksmith’s hammer resounded,

beating the anvil at regular intervals. Never since has Gaston been able to hear this ringing sound, without its bringing before him the walk in the park at Barjols, and Sabine offering him the rose.

After a short silence he replied, " You will understand why I have chosen you for a confidante. Once, when I was a child, my father built a new pigeon house. But for many long weeks the pigeons refused to sit on their nests. Nothing could keep them from the tower which had been their former dwelling place, and toward which for so long a time, from all parts of the country, they had taken their rapid flight. To force them to forget the way, it was necessary to demolish it. Well, then! my heart will also refuse, I know it, to forget the dear dwelling toward which its love flies. Always, in spite of everything, it will return here, and therefore—I have come to demolish the tower."

Sabine made no reply. She carried to her lips the calyx without its leaves, and set her teeth into it, as if to taste its bitterness.

Gaston continued: " Has your brother, who pretends that this marriage is a ridiculous

one, told you of my youth? Has he said that I have caused my mother unhappiness, that I have stripped her of the little left her by another spendthrift? To-day, she imposes a penance upon me, or rather something yet more unavoidable, a restitution. The restitution is called Henriette Loidreau. I have accepted it—accepted, you hear me? not asked, for my mother did that. Now, am I one of those who are allowed to choose their own wife? I know a house where I was greeted by the most cordial friendship, the most kindly hospitality and exquisite grace. What would they have said to me, in this house, if I had allowed my heart to hope and spoken my dream aloud? Would they not have closed the doors against me?"

She persisted in her silence.

"Have pity upon me!" said he becoming excited. "Tell me that I am right, that I did right, not to speak, that they would have ignorinously refused me! Tell me that I am good for nothing in the world except to ornament the sous-préfecture of Montescourt. Is it true that I have lost nothing in keeping silence, that I shall lose nothing by marrying

the one that I do not love? If I could hear it from your own lips it would be a supreme consolation! Ay! well, your silence is the best of replies."

"You have compared me to a tower," said Sabine sighing. "Towers do not speak, above all when they are demolished."

At this moment, Raoul joined them—pre-occupied with Romulus. They had changed his shoes after examining his feet, still the lameness continued. Nothing ailed the foot, but for all that, here was a useless beast!

"Ah! my dear friend," said Raoul, "you are fortunate not to have any horses!"

"Yes," said Reygnac, "I am fortunate, very fortunate."

They had reached the little gate at the end of the park, Raoul put the key in the lock.
"We shall see you again soon?"

"I fear not," replied Gaston; "we are in the midst of our busy week and I shall be busy from morning till night; afterward I go on a vacation."

"Go! good luck to your candidate and much pleasure to you on your vacation. You must need recreation."

"You would not believe how much I need it. But it is time for the train; Adieu!"

Gaston shook the marquis's hand and remained for some time bowing very low before Sabine. Then he passed through the gate, and with a loud sound it closed upon him.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE next day but one was Wednesday of the famous week. Loidreau, without waiting to be announced, rushed like a whirlwind into the office of the sous-préfet. In this man, with drawn features, red eyes, and nervous gestures, you would never have recognized the grave person who would sit an entire afternoon without moving, to try two infringements, condemn three drunkards, and regulate the accounts of a farm servant.

“Here is an awkward thing!” exclaimed he, throwing himself into the first chair.

“What is it?” said Reygnac, struck by the piteous look of his future uncle. “What has happened to you?”

“It happens that my secretary has left. The fellow chose his time well!”

“Has Perrin left you?”

“He took the express train this morning, and is not far from Paris, if he has not been

upset—which would please me very much. I am in a fine mess!"

"What passed between you?"

"Between us, nothing. But do you understand that this vulgar fellow imagined himself in love with my niece? He told her so yesterday, and I think that it was not the first time, either. Henriette did wrong to send him about his business before several people."

"What!" said Reygnac, much surprised, "you think she did wrong?"

"Oh! my dear fellow, pardon me, I forgot to whom I was speaking. I am supposed to know nothing, it is true. But I am not blind, and in spite of Madame de Reygnac's cleverness, one can never make me believe that Henriette goes three times a week to Montescourt, only to talk with her. Believe me, however, that I am delighted with what has happened. All the same, it would not have mattered much to you if my niece had been patient one week longer. In a time like this, we must be careful of people's feelings! Especially when we need them."

"Were you present at the explanation?"

"No, but I presume it was a lively one;

Henriette came to me with such a face—
What an energetic woman! She was not willing that Perrin should stay another night under my roof, I should say her roof. I made some objections. But in three words she reduced me to silence. When one is not in one's own house—— Finally, I had to put the creature out of the house. If you could have seen his look! you would have said that it was he who turned me out. What a beast!"

"He is a fool!"

"That is precisely what I said to him. 'Monsieur,' said he, with an exasperating calmness, 'the biggest fool here is not the one whom you think it to be.'"

"Hum! I hope you asked for the key to the 'little desk.'"

"You can believe it. But who can assure me that the scamp has not taken precautions? Whatever happens, I am deprived of my right arm at the very moment of going to the front. What do you think of the balloting Sunday?"

"I have no fears. But to tell the truth, for two days I have seen nobody. Friends and enemies seem to be dead."

"Do you find it so, too? I am struck by

it myself. This morning the *Democrat* hardly insulted me. Eh bien! it is not a good sign. Look out for bombs at the last hour! As for myself, I know one person who will not go to bed until Sunday night. No secretary! This devilish fool will never get to Heaven, I am sure of that. Adieu, I must be off."

The day before the all important one—Saturday morning—the bomb suspected by Loidreau burst over all Montescourt. To each elector the mail brought a Paris newspaper, crushing the marshal's candidate. This time it did not throw out vulgar abuse, set off by insults thrown at hazard and hastily, without propriety or proofs. The article, falsely cunning, penetrated into Loidreau's weakest points, like an Italian dagger into the defects of an armour. The most dangerous thing about it was, they pierced into his old love affairs, political alliances, and promises made; threats which had escaped him, all, even the most intimate secrets of the electoral affair. One could read between the lines, a veiled but insulting allusion to certain projects of marriage.

A practised hand—Perrin's, one could not mistake it—had stripped Loidreau and left him

naked, a humbug, upon the political field, amid the distrust of his adherents and the jeers of his adversaries, and without any means of replying. In the first place, the time was wanting; in the next, the person who could have dictated the reply was not there; finally, what was worse, it all was true.

The effect produced by this exposure of two hundred lines was enormous. This vigorous article, crisp and cold as an iceberg, without one light word, without one useless adjective, had in the indictment a cold bearing and dangerous precision. After these three weeks of provincial eloquence and third-class prose, one read at last an article written by a talented person.

“This Perrin has done well!” said the people, who were able to understand it.

Loidreau did not need to rack his brains to appreciate the motive of the writer of the article. With his native good sense, sharpened by his experience in the electoral world, he prophesied.

“This wretch of a Perrin never did anything so good when he worked for me. Magalas will exult, I am sure of it. The idiot! He

ought to tremble. If I am beaten this renegade of a Jules will become master of the parish."

At last the great day, October 14th, arrived, foggy and dark, and upon forty thousand battle fields the silent musketry of bulletins began. At eight o'clock in the evening, the sous-préfecture of Montescourt looked like the headquarters of a general, where every five minutes a mounted policeman brought, in his saddle bags, the result of voting in a neighboring parish. For those cantons at a distance, the telegraph worked without ceasing.

In the offices, open only for the influential heads of the two parties, Léfèvre and the subordinate employés recorded the number of votes, whilst in Reygnac's office, the marshal's candidate and five or six officers of high rank smoked their cigars and waited for the news.

Upon the street, outside the gate, a thousand people waited; many of the husbands had brought their wives and children "to see," although the feeble light from four gas jets did not allow them to see a great deal.

From time to time, by Reygnac's order, a

servant walked down the road to the gate, and very proud of his importance, announced, in a loud voice, the latest news received. Then from the crowd, for a moment silent, a low murmur would arise, without shouts, excitement, or tumult. In Paris it would have been a good occasion to strangle two or three policemen. But they were one hundred and fifty leagues from Paris, and all these good people would not have known how to go to work to kill a fly.

The vote at Montescourt, foretold in advance, had been overwhelming against Loidreau. But in the rural districts, Magalas was beaten. Meanwhile he could have resisted better if they had been able to foresee it. At ten o'clock they commenced to talk of a second ballot, and the interest in the combat became serious. Nevertheless, the tranquillity of the public was such that nearly everybody deserted the square. A fine rain was falling. Only some advanced Republicans held out, forming little groups under their umbrellas. (At all times, commissioners are afraid of colds.) In Reygnac's office the conversation dragged; Loidreau had reached the limit of human endurance, and stretched out in an

arm-chair, gave himself up to serious reflections. Meanwhile, he had got into the habit of not sleeping. At midnight the second ballot was a certain fact, and the officers returned to their homes with long faces—a prey to dark presentiments.

If the marshal's candidate was not able to get the advantage over this easy ground, how would it be elsewhere?

About two o'clock in the morning Reygnac sent his telegram to the préfecture and to the minister. Neither of the candidates was elected, but Loidreau had a slight advantage.

In fifteen days it would be necessary to begin anew, and if taken together, the results of this first battle were not favorable to the 16th of May, the party would be in a difficult position for the second.

Loidreau took leave of Reygnac with a sober face. At heart, he thought that the sous-préfet seemed indifferent and lacked firmness. He could not refrain from saying so.

"What matters it," said Gaston, who did not feel in the best of spirits. "My resignation will be sent in to-morrow morning."

"Monsieur," replied the deputy coldly, "one

does not give his resignation in the presence of the enemy. Remember, after all, only for you, Henriette would not have been so hard on that stubborn Perrin. If he had not left me, I should have been deputy now. Do not be angry with me if I am nervous this evening. This battle has cost me 40,000 francs, without counting my trouble. One would be nervous at least."

The uncle and the future nephew parted, at heart not pleased with each other.

The next day it was generally known that the attempt of the 16th of May was abortive. From this moment the sous-préfecture became a suspected place, where nobody dared to be seen.

CHAPTER XXII.

CERTAINLY if there was an officer in France who had good reason to remain calm in the midst of this general dismay, it was Gaston de Reygnac. What mattered his position to him? He was going to have a situation which all the ministers in the republic would have nothing to do with, save the minister of finance, who would pay him his yearly income.

However, the morning after the voting he awoke in a bad humor. He scented, like a sickly odor, failure. At any rate, he was not the composer of the play; all the same he had acted an insignificant part, but it was unsuccessful, and in spite of all his philosophy, he could not help trembling under the hisses he expected to hear.

At the usual hour Léfèvre arrived, and his looks rested sadly on his chief, as a shepherd with a tender heart sighs as he looks at a growing lamb. "Poor little thing! You have

not long to live, one of these days we shall see your cutlets upon the table."

This look saddened Gaston, he felt in his heart the cold feeling of a vague presentiment. It seemed to him that some unknown misfortune threatened him.

Thus, at certain important moments, at the time of distressful determination, we hear within ourselves the faint echo of some uneasy rumor.

They say, that on the brink of the dark stream, the voices of those who have loved us — cry out, "Take care!" Salutary voices, too rarely headed! Those who speak to us, are so far away!

Already, Gaston found Montescourt unbearable. He felt the need of change, to see other faces. Toward the middle of the day he took the train for Saint Pardoult.

"At least," said he with a sad smile, "I ought to pay a visit to my future mother-in-law."

Doctor Doniol received him with the same consideration as if the 16th of May had been a triumph. The good man, engrossed with his patients, his stuffed animals and his family,

did not see in these last elections anything more than in the ordinary elections. He did not know that, already another had applied for his place and that before six months, recall and dismissal, the mother of poverty, would come to seek him behind these gates.

"Will you go over to the house, monsieur?" asked he. "We have several new cases."

"No, I came simply for an airing. Let me see only the poor lady in whom I am interested——"

"Madame Loidreau? She represents that the trial of her case is finished, and that she must now go before the judge. She still believes that you are her lawyer; more than ever, you inspire her with confidence. She is very calm, nevertheless, with numerous half lucid intervals."

Some moments later, Doctor Doniol ushered the Count de Reygnac into the presence of the sick lady.

"Here is your lawyer," said he smiling. "I will leave you to talk together."

The old lady, without leaving her arm-chair, held out her hand to Gaston. Then, addressing the doctor, whom she took for the jailer,

and pointing to the attendant, who never left her, she said gravely, "I hope that I shall be permitted to confer with my lawyer, without the jailer assisting at the interview."

Doctor Doniol made a sign to the attendant to go out. He left also, a moment after.

"Now, monsieur, let us talk seriously," commenced Madame Loidreau, passing her hand over her face to steady her ideas.

"Here I am, to be sent before a jury, and between us, I expected it. The question is to defend me, and that, you will see, is difficult."

"I am sure not," protested Reygnac, "for you are not guilty; I know it better than anybody else. Make an effort, madame, and try to remember."

"My dear monsieur, you are sent to me by my daughter, my poor Henriette; that is sufficient for me. A lawyer is like a confessor; I will tell you everything without any hesitation. At first; whatever you may say, I am forced to admit, that I am guilty; that I did kill the child, only it is impossible for me to recall what I did with the body, I was so ill afterward."

With a bewildered air, her eyes staring vacantly, she pushed under her black lace cap the gray locks which escaped. Reygnac looked at her sorrowfully. In a few weeks he would be the son-in-law of this crazy woman! Touching her shoulder to attract her attention, he asked her, "How could a mother as good as you kill her child?"

At this question, she left her chair and walked about the room, wringing her hands. Then she seemed to suddenly make a resolution and stopped before Reygnac.

"Mon Dieu!" moaned she, "I must tell everything to you, for you may be able to save us all. Monsieur, upon all that I hold most dear in this world and the next, upon my soul and upon my daughter's, the child that I killed was not mine!"

Poor woman! it was touching. She was still beautiful, and astonishingly majestic as she drew up her thin body and raised her trembling hands toward heaven. But why this idea, which she clung to without ceasing, of an infant killed? Gaston tried to make the crazy woman talk.

"What was it that caused you to do this

horrible deed?" asked Reygnac. "What will you reply to the accusation?"

"Alas!" said she, dropping her arms, "I know nothing about it. You must understand that I would let myself be condemned a dozen times sooner than to betray my daughter's misfortune. It was precisely to conceal that, that I committed the crime!"

A vague presentiment of something horrible, startled Reygnac, but he repulsed it before having it clearly proved. Was he not face to face with a crazy woman, who raved about the death of a child who was living and in perfect health? As he arose, incapable of listening longer to this grievous profanation, and giving up the idea of being able to obtain one sensible word, he noticed the mysterious bag of which the doctor had spoken. The sight of it gave him the idea of asking Madame Loidreau this question:

"You always have——the journal?"

"Yes," said she, putting her finger on her lips, "it is the only proof of my child's innocence. Poor Henriette! others besides her have been the victims of this monster. Read it yourself and you will see."

She unfolded the paper and spread it before Gaston, and with her lean finger she pointed to the paragraph, the reading of which some months before had caused Henriette to faint.

"But then," stammered Reygnac, ready to faint himself, "this child?"

"He owed his birth to the most horrible of crimes; I killed it. You are frightened, are you not? Ah! monsieur, you can well see that it concerned my child's honor. Wait, listen to the story. It is necessary that you should know it in order to defend us and to save us."

Then, believing that she was talking to her defender, the poor woman told all. Her daughter was placed under the care of Doctor Z——; the governess who went with her, struck with terror at the sight of the instruments, retreated outside the operating room. Then the discovery and fatal results of the violent outrage; the unfortunate girl's father died suddenly from the shock of the news, the mother was obliged to take Henriette away, the sojourn in Egypt under a false name, the return with a child, called to all, Henriette's brother,

At this moment, Madame Loidreau expressed herself calmly; evidently she had forgotten who was the sad heroine of the drama which she recited. The wheel-work of memory still worked, but darkness had settled over her brain.

Gaston full of horror, incapable of speaking one word, felt his face and hands bathed in a cold perspiration. Ah! he understood now, why Henriette's face contracted in so strange a manner when they offered the child,—whom everybody believed to be her brother—to her to kiss.

He made an effort to ask:

“Where is the governess?”

“In a convent,” tranquilly replied the crazy woman. “Perhaps she is dead, she adored my daughter.”

Then she coolly resumed her recital, relieving her benumbed conscience of the heavy burden which had overwhelmed it for years. It was such a horrible thing, this mother destroying, unconsciously, the future of her beloved daughter, that Reygnac almost wished to put his hands on her mouth to stop this unconscious sacrilege. But with that egotism

which justifies a man who escapes from a shipwreck, he thought of himself first, and said to himself:

"What might have happened, if chance had not led me here; would this infamous marriage have been consummated?"

Suddenly the cloud shut down again and the darkness clouded anew the poor creature's lifeless intelligence.

Her sentences became incoherent, losing all meaning. Presently Madame Loidreau burst into peals of laughter, then uttered groans and cries. A relapse was coming on; Gaston, frightened, called the attendant, and without trying to see the doctor again, he left, asking himself if he was not crazy too, to take the ravings of a crazy woman seriously.

However, between what he had heard and what he had read, the evidence was too direct not to produce a strong probability, at least a terrible doubt. He must, at any cost, find out at once, but how? By what means? One only, was possible; an explanation with Henriette.

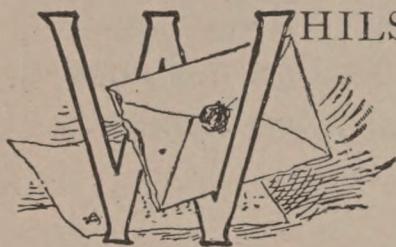
What an interview! Atrocious, if the mother had told the truth, distressing, if it was the hallucination of an insane woman,

"Ah!" cried Reygnac, clenching his fist with rage, "why did I ever put my foot in Montescourt?"

That evening he wrote Henriette simply a note saying:

"I will come to Fresnau at three o'clock tomorrow. Do not be offended if I express the desire to see you alone. You will understand, at the very first words, that it was necessary."

CHAPTER XXIII.



WHILST Loidreau's niece was far from guessing the truth, she felt, when reading these lines the next day—an astonishment that was not agreeable. Why this demand for a mysterious interview? The coldness of the expressions in which he solicited it, did not announce anything romantic. If she could have done so, Henriette would have avoided the interview. She felt neither strength nor humor to brave certain situations. Madame de Reygnac was the only person that she would have been glad to see; but, at the same time that the son's note arrived, came one from the mother, lamenting the fifteen days' delay in the result of the elections and announcing that she herself would be detained for several days longer in the capital.

When the clock struck three, Henriette

Loidreau was alone at the entrance of the park, under the pretext of an order to be given to the gate-keeper. Almost at the same time the carriage which brought Gaston appeared, he stepped out of it before entering the grounds, and left it standing in the road.

Rarely had he felt a more painful emotion than the one he was suffering from as he walked by the side of the young girl, under a covered walk, already stripped of half its foliage. He sought for the best way to open the interview, the most delicate that had ever necessitated all the prudence of a gentleman.

“Well!” said Henriette, astonished at the silence, “all there is to do, is to begin again. Who would have believed that Magalas was so solid?”

Gaston had hardly listened to the words that were spoken near him; but the sound of Henriette’s voice seemed to give him strength to broach the fatal subject.

“Yesterday,” began he, “I went to Saint Pardoult; I saw your mother.”

A sad expression instantly came into the girl’s face.

“Poor mamma!” said she sighing. “You

have seen her? What destruction, is it not? What a desolate ruin of a being so good and devoted! Did she say anything to you?"

"Yes!" said Gaston; "and God is my witness that I wish with all my heart I had not heard what she said."

Henriette's pale face became livid; she asked herself if on this side, too, her repose was menaced by the fatal discovery.

With an effort she stammered, "They said that my mother would not speak to anybody."

"Oh! Dieu! continued Gaston without hearing her, "never was a man placed in a position as horrible as I find myself. Will you ever pardon me whatever happens, if I say more? If there was a person on this earth who would deliver me from this horrible nightmare, I would go to him, not to you, I swear it."

"Speak then," said Henriette, "but speak quickly. Do not make me suffer longer."

"Before your mother's illness obliged you to separate her from the world, have you ever heard her make allusions——"

"Be more clear," interrupted Henriette, wringing her hands. "Once more, hurry."

"God help me to be clear! One question only: Are you Felix's sister?"

"No," said she stopping suddenly and looking her questioner in the eyes. "And was it to ask me this question that you came here? You, Monsieur de Reygnac, you?"

In this moment, bewildered and stupefied by sorrow, losing the true idea of things, she thought of Perrin, and was astonished to think that this miserable scamp had a rival in infamy.

"Listen to me," replied Gaston. "It is necessary that all should be explained before we part. If my mother has told the truth, we are in some sort of way engaged to each other——"

"Engaged to each other!" exclaimed Henriette. "Your mother has said that we were——Oh! no, it is not possible!"

"She told me that you would give your hand to me, that I had only to take it; I took it in fact; this is the real truth. But after what I heard at Saint Pardoult, how could I let you believe one hour longer?"

"Enough, monsieur, I understand that you hesitate to finish the sentence, and I can with one gesture dismiss you before you complete

it. It will be easier for me, and for you also, without doubt, but I wish, before leaving here, you should at least leave your esteem. Madame de Reygnac deceived herself, she saw my hand offered, perhaps; but it was to call for an impossible salvation; not to drag her son into an abyss, that she could not suspect, poor woman!"

"I will never forgive my mother," said Gaston, "for bringing me to this, by her foolish precipitation."

"Believe me, monsieur, pardon her, I forgive her; I, the outrage that I have received on her account! For after all, you have, for twenty-four hours, accused me in your own mind of wishing to render myself culpable of an odious crime toward you. Will you have faith in my words, or must Madame de Reygnac clear me, by her testimony? Answer, shall I repeat in your presence the language I used to her, she has so misunderstood?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Gaston, oppressed by the rôle that he so unwillingly played, "I swear to you that I believe you!"

"Listen to me then; I said to your mother that I could not be your wife, that an insur-

mountable barrier separated us. Was that not enough? Ought I to have told her the story, the true story that you have learned? Oh! Dieu! to think that it was my mother who told you this story! I must pardon her too, poor mamma!"

"Heavens," groaned the young man, "say no more. Why did you not send me away without replying?"

"What was the use! The evil was done. No, I have never thought of covering you with my shame; I know too much of the laws of honor of our sexes; laws all powerful, very unequal. For you, Monsieur de Reygnac, you who shudder at the very thought that I might have become your wife. You are honor itself—is it not so? I am stained, upon me a dark shadow has fallen. Such are our laws! That is the reason why my father died suddenly, my mother became insane, and a scamp, master of my secret, tried to oblige me to marry him."

"The wretch! I understand now, certain things that you said to me."

"Perhaps also you will understand, that I have spoken to you now without reserve. At

least, I would save from the wreck the esteem of an honest man, of a friend! When I think that for several days you have considered me your fiancée! All my life I shall guard this souvenir as something precious. Ah! if you had been able to do, what God himself cannot, efface the past! With what joy, with what tender thankfulness I would have placed at your feet, all that I have, all that I am, all that which can exist, of good in me! To be the honored wife, loved perhaps, by a man like you! To kiss, on my bended knees, the hand which would have detached from me the heavy stone which drags me to the bottom of the abyss! It would have been a most beautiful dream, but the most impossible that one could have; I know it very well, I assure you!"

Henriette talked with such an increasing exaltation that it frightened Gaston. What would he not have given to be able to calm, if only for an instant, this passionate grief! He said aloud what he had repeated many times to himself:

"Mon Dieu! Why did I ever come to Montescourt?"

"Do not lament too much," said she gently. "For three years I have asked myself why I went through a certain door, behind which was awaiting me a misfortune greater than any that could ever happen to you. Why? is the most useless of questions, when one asks it of fate. Now, adieu. If ever you think yourself unhappy, think of what you have just seen and heard."

She went away without a gesture, without looking back, walking with a rapid step and drawing her cloak about her as if she felt more keenly the cold wind of a rainy October day.

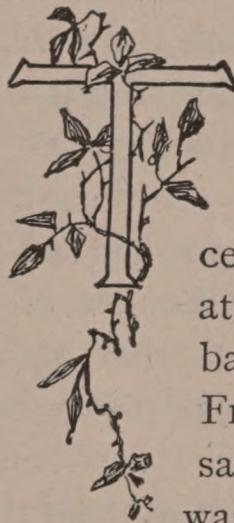
Reygnac did not leave the place where he stood until Henriette had disappeared behind a clump of trees. Then he left the park, entered the carriage and took the road to the city.

The next day he wrote to his mother:

"Do not make any observations or ask any questions about what I shall tell you. The marriage which you have had in view is impossible. Do not think of leaving Paris; I shall be there myself the next day after the election by second ballot. When there, I ask of you,

with your usual ability, to find me some position, anywhere out of Europe; the farthest possible. If possible, I will go to fight the Turks, sooner than not to leave."

CHAPTER XXIV.



HEY were preparing for the second balloting at Montescourt, but everybody knew what the result would be. Deception was no longer possible; the attempt had miscarried. If this barbarous word was part of the French vocabulary, one would have said that already the 16th of May was a "Krach."

The sudden change of mind accomplished with such rapidity in our country, offers striking examples. Among the large number of employés and officers who scented the change of wind, and worked to change sides, if there was time, if not, to manage to get out of it as well as possible, Gaston de Reygnac could make curious studies upon the greatness of characters and the independance of consciences.

When he went into the street, people avoided him; those who a week before bowed to the ground before him, made clever dodges or went into shops so as not to ruin themselves by raising their hats to him on their way.

In his office, he only saw Léfèvre, but it was a new Léfèvre, cold, formal, with the rigid bearing of a hospital nurse pouring the last bowl of tea for a consumptive near his end.

Now, nobody asked any favor of him; it would be time lost. They waited for his successor. With an irony that they thought infinitely cutting, some under-officers that had been discharged by him took great pleasure in sending him their cards.

Loidreau still struggled, but like a general who sees both wings of his army give away, he felt that defeat was before him. On the right, Perrin had betrayed him, on the left, the Administration was henceforth without arms.

So nobody was surprised after the second balloting to know that Magalas had won. That evening Reygnac had nobody in his office while he received the results of the voting. A servant was sent on horseback from Fresnau to carry the news of the definite defeat of his

master. Thus ended the 16th of May at Montescourt.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Gaston wrote and sent this telegram to the préfet and the minister:

“Magalas (opposition) elected.”

In writing these three words he performed the last act of his life as sous-préfet; hence forth he was free. His chief, in an official letter, had permitted him to absent himself “for family reasons” as soon as the ballot was counted. In twenty-four hours he would have said adieu to Montescourt for always, and to all who had filled his existence for four months; to Léfèvre, to the licenses for drink, to Magalas, to the articles in the *Democrat*, to Loidreau, to Henriette, and to Sabine.

The last one, to tell the truth, was the only one whom it was a trial to leave. Before leaving—for the end of the world perhaps—he wished to see her again, to carry away her picture, as a traveller carries, on returning from an excursion, the sketch of a landscape which has pleased most of all, and where in his dreams he has established his home,

Could he have the conceit to go again to Barjols? With what face could he accost this young girl? Could he expect to have from her, anything but a cold compassion, if not colored with irony? Three weeks before, he had almost repulsed her!

He had taken particular pains to tell her that he loved only her in this world, but that he was going to marry another richer.

He had explained why, by discouragement, by weariness, finally to stop the complaints of his mother, for whom money was everything, and whom he had helped to render poor.

Hereafter, Sabine was dead for him. His career also was dead, dead in its youth! Everything had collapsed, and if his mother did remain, it was a mother with whom he had not the courage to live until forgiveness had commenced its work.

Go then, Reygnac! en route for Aden, Madagascar, or Bankok!

In the dark night, all was silent, no noise in the city save at some distance in a faubourg the faint echo of the national hymn, shouted by the treacherous voices of a band of patriots.

Suddenly, from the tower of the old church which rose above the trees in the garden, one heard the bell ring. Is it striking the hour? No, for it has just struck midnight. Suddenly, at the same moment the sinister call of the bugler sounded in the neighboring street. It is the alarm for fire. At Montescourt, thank God! the alarm for a riot was never heard.

“*Ma foi!*” thought Reygnac, “I am no longer sous-préfet. No matter, it shall not be said that they put out the fire without my presence, the last night of my reign.”

He took a cloak and went out to learn where the fire was. As he reached the gate, Bongrand, Commissioner of Police, put his hand on the bell.

“Monsieur le sous-préfet,” said he recognizing his chief by his voice, “I have come to tell you that the fire is at Barjols——”

A quarter of an hour later, Gaston left the city at full speed on his hired nag. Already, upon the road he could distinguish a swarm of shadows, hardly recognizable. They walked along quietly, discussing the importance of this

disaster. They were the curious ones who went with their wives to view the fire from the first prominence. The firemen were running two by two, with elbows pressed to the body, without speaking, vests upon their arms, neck rigid to preserve the equilibrium of their hats, and in the darkness, the curious ones, less zealous, amused themselves in guessing the names of those who passed, going to spend the night at the fire, while they, themselves, would be buried under their soft blankets in an hour.

In the first village that Gaston passed through, the bugle, drum, and bells were making noise enough to raise the dead, although every man, woman, and child in the village were up and stirring. In the country it is considered a token of neighborly interest to make as much noise as possible at a fire.

After an hour's fast riding, Reygnac saw, at a turn of the road, the fire in all its fury. It was at Barjols, but he breathed freer when he saw at some distance from the fire the black mass of trees in the park and the slate roof of the chateau shining by the reflection of the



"The fire broke out at midnight."

flames; to the right, the dark lines of houses extended, pierced to the very centre by the bright flames, through which the triangles of the gable ends joined to the blackened beams showed off like the letters in a comic alphabet. The streets were inundated, the two files of people extending to the river consisted of women, children, and old men, with empty buckets; able-bodied men with full ones. The fire engines, as close as possible to the fire, threw their jets with the regular sound of the machine, worked by the fire-men, who bent down and rose up, without relaxation, speechless, panting, with bare chests; while their captains cried, “Courage, boys! work steadily!”

They saved the cattle before all the rest, before the old men and children, for these could be gotten out easier; scattered about the fields, the frightened animals stood still, with extended necks, and filled the air with their bellowing; other cries, human voices, replied to this mournful concert. It was the poor peasants who, seated in a corner of the devastated garden, groaned upon the announcement of their broken furniture, and hid

their heads in their aprons that they might not see all that remained of their homes burn.

Suddenly in all this crowd, a rumor circulated:

“The sous-préfet has come!”

Gaston de Reygnac, preceded by a police officer, who made a passageway for him, approached the place the most threatened, not so much to see as to be seen, and to encourage those who were working. In the thickest of the tumult he found Raoul de Barjols, who set the example, and bravely exposed himself.

“You here!” exclaimed the marquis without stopping. “I think the fire will not extend farther now; but since you have come, go to the chateau and busy yourself with a poor fellow who fell into the fire and was taken out with great trouble. I had him taken to our house, but do not know how he is. Go, I must stay here.”

Guided still by the policeman, Reygnac went to the chateau, which appeared deserted, only that all the doors were open. He entered the vestibule, lighted by one little lamp,

then into a room at the end of which he saw a light. At last, he entered the drawing-room; there upon a sofa which Gaston knew well, the wounded man was extended, just as they had placed him, not long before. His black beard stood out in relief against the mortal pallor of his face, and through the opening of his coarse linen shirt, burned in places, one could see his burned chest.

On her knees at his right, a nun felt his pulse, and fixed the calm look of a woman used to seeing suffering, upon the face of the man. On the other side, Sabine, clothed in a white wool dressing gown, was stirring a drink upon a table. She turned at the sound of Reygnac's steps, then advanced quickly, making a reflector with her hand to see in the dark.

"Ah! it is you," said she. "I thought you would come."

"It is I, your brother sent me here. Are you alone?"

"Everybody is at the fire, and I insisted that my mother should not rise. This poor man is very badly injured. He remained for

a long time in a faint, in the smoke, and has not regained consciousness. Ah! This fire-engine that I was in such a hurry to have! Here is its inauguration!"

Reygnac placed his ear on the man's heart; he listened a long time, while Sabine returned to her bottles.

Suddenly Gaston rose and said in a low voice:

"He is dead!"

"I feared so," said the nun quietly, "for some time his pulse has not beat. And the priest is absent from the parish!"

Sabine abandoned her useless preparations and came nearer to the poor man.

"Are you sure that he is dead?" said she.

Gaston replied by a sign that he was sure.

Then Mademoiselle de Barjols with a pious care, crossed the coarse cloth upon the dead man's chest and joined his hands together. Then she knelt, and with eyes wet with tears of compassion, she commenced the prayer for the dead, to which on the other side the nun responded.

The policeman had left to find somebody to remove the body, Reygnac upright, could not take his eyes off from Sabine's face, lighted by the double halo of goodness and charity—two powerful attractions in woman. With her hands joined, head bent, the severe lines of her white woollen robe, her beautiful blonde hair done up hastily at the first sound of the alarm, she would have won the heart of the most indifferent of men. Her fervent and melodious voice modulated with a plaintive tenderness “the sweet prayer of death” and would have made a heart of stone vibrate.

Reygnac's heart was much inclined to soften.

He looked at Sabine as he had never looked before; for the first time he felt that he understood her and that he must say “good-by” to her.

“What will be my last hour?” thought he. “Shall I ever think of this poor devil, who left the world cried over by this angel, without envy? Ah! what a dream! to live on earth assisted by this generous hand, to die consoled by that voice.”

The last words were being spoken by the two women. When Sabine arose, the prayer finished, she heard, like an echo behind her, Gaston, who replied in a singularly grave voice, "Amen!"

At this moment, they looked at each other, they understood that their thoughts were reunited far from earth, where all ends so quickly, upon the threshold of the world of souls, where nothing is ended, not even love, which ends too soon elsewhere.

While the sister covered the face of the dead man with a white cloth, Gaston approached Mademoiselle de Barjols.

"Adieu," said he to her, in a low voice. "You do not need me, I will return to the fire."

"Come back with Raoul when all is over, to rest and refresh yourself. It will be daylight soon. What a night it has been!"

"I shall not be able to return; I leave for Paris to-day. Singular chance of fate! Without this disaster, which caused the death of this man, God knows when I should have seen you again."

Sabine lowered her eyes, believing that the allusion concerned the approaching marriage of the Count de Reygnac. She did not know of the lamentable incident which had broken it, if one can speak of breaking a marriage so far from ever being consummated.

"My sincere prayers will accompany you," said she, in the same quiet voice that she had used when reading the prayers for the dead.

"I fear that your prayers will have a long way to go; I will tell you, you are destined to hear the first news concerning me—I will tell you that I leave the administration, before it leaves me. After our yesterday's exploits, I do not feel very secure; I go to take a less pleasant situation, and without doubt, far away from my friends and France."

"But," said she, paler at these words than at any time when near the dead man, "I thought you told me—"

"That I was to be married. It was a mistake; I made another that same day. One must pay for their errors. You remember a faded flower that I wished to keep, a fresh

rose full of perfume that I did not wish to take? It is the emblem of all my life. Who knows what might have been, had I listened to my heart, had I taken the rose? Who knows if the sweet creature who offered it had not ended by granting me something more—some day?"

A movement of Sabine's made Gaston think that he had offended her by this language.

"Pardon me, I ought not only to respect you, but the dead; but in face of death, one understands what life is, and speaks the truth, and then, soon I shall be far away. Ah! I swear to you now, that I envy that man, lying in eternal rest, sleeping the last sleep, whose eyes have been closed by your hands. Give them to me, those holy hands, that I may kiss them once more. Now adieu!"

He went out very slowly, seeking to prolong this supreme moment. He was already in the vestibule, accompanied by Sabine, who, no less affected, could hardly speak a word.

"Oh! Mon Dieu!" said she at last, "what pain you give me!"

He looked at her once more, their eyes ex-

pressed without reserve, at that moment, what their lips would not say. Gaston still walked on; he reached the outside door; only three steps and fate would separate them forever. Suddenly Sabine's pure face was covered with a bright blush. Her resigned expression gave place to resolute will; she had to decide upon her future happiness. Upon a table stood a vase of flowers that she had gathered the night before, without suspecting that these fragrant blossoms would serve the next day to seal her fate. With a trembling hand she took a rose and approaching Gaston handed it to him without saying a word.

"Ah!" said he falling on one knee, "this time I take it! Dear Sabine! I prayed with you a few moments ago. Before God who has heard me, I give my life to you."

He arose and his lips rested upon the forehead of the one whom he was to call his wife. Almost at the same moment, they heard steps in the court, and the Marquis de Barjols appeared, soaked from head to foot, covered with mud, his face and hands black with smoke.

"Well!" said he, wiping his forehead, "is

this what you call putting out a fire? You take good care of yourselves! Fortunately, we did not need your assistance."

Turning toward his sister, he asked—

"How is the man?"

"He is dead," said Gaston gravely. "But this world is full of mysterious links; this night, which has taken this poor fellow's life, has given to me a new one. It has cost you a sister, but you have gained a brother."

"Ah! so much the better!" exclaimed Raoul throwing himself on his friend's neck. "I was beginning to find you both stupid. You have come to your senses at last, and I am content."

* * * * *

To-day, Gaston is in a strange country, working courageously, but his post is not far from the frontier, and every year he comes to Barjols with Sabine and their two children.

The Countess de Reygnac, dowager, died the year following her son's marriage. Almost at the same time, the poor insane Madame Loidreau was freed from the miseries of her sad life.

By her side in the churchyard, a second mound is marked by a headstone bearing the inscription "Henriette Loidreau."

The new deputy is named Jules Perrin; he is a radical millionaire, and is the guardian of Felix, who is ten years old, and who begs to be sent to college.

People wondered why Jules Perrin should be given control of the Loidreau estates, but Gaston knows that Henriette's fortune and perhaps her life paid the price of the secretary's silence.

THE END:

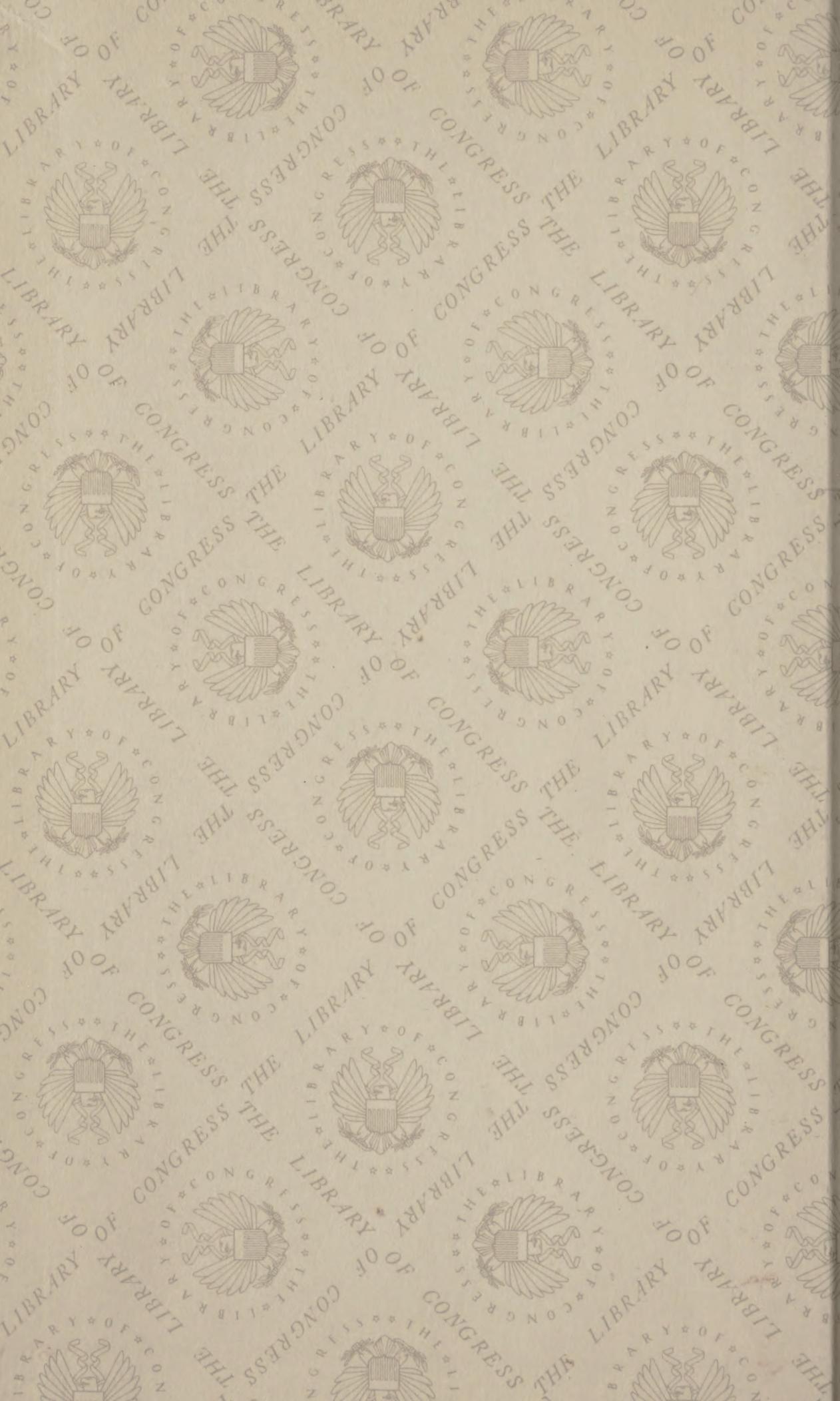


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